



HILDEGARDE

Books by Kathleen Norris

HILDEGARDE
THE BLACK FLEMINGS
LITTLE SHIPS
NOON
ROSE OF THE WORLD
THE CALLAHANS AND THE
MURPHYS
BUTTERFLY
CERTAIN PEOPLE OF IMPORTANCE
LUCRETIA LOMBARD
THE BELOVED WOMAN
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UNDERTOW
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THE HEART OF RACHAEL
THE STORY OF JULIA PAGE
THE TREASURE
SATURDAY'S CHILD
POOR, DEAR MARGARET KIRBY
THE RICH MRS. BURGOYNE
MOTHER

HILDEGARDE

BY
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FIRST EDITION

TO THE CARRIGAN — HIMSELF
CARRIGANCOOL, CONNECTICUT

*When the blue stillness of the snows is gone,
And gone the feathered greenery of the spring,
When Autumn, dreaming, treads a pathway on
Heaped leaves, through crystal mornings smouldering,
When, in the shadow of the vines' clear bloom
On the long arbor table, jars are set,
And tumbled grapes and peaches catch the bloom
Of sunset;—then, Great Shades who hunger yet
For Academus,—Southwark,—Les Jardies,—
Do you come down to share, to claim it, too,
Carrigancool?—where we who hold the key
Taste those deep joys that, living, once you knew?
De Leon, do you halt your weary mount
Won even from deathless Youth's to Friendship's fount?*

HILDEGARDE

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CHAPTER I

A SHAFT of bright California winter sunshine was streaming through the dirty kitchen window; there was no warmth in it, but there had been a fire in the kitchen all morning, and the illusion was one of almost summery heat.

Flies, children's sticky fingers, and drying steam had smirched the cheap dazzled glass; the cracked torn shade, with the wooden bar gone from the torn lower hem, had stuck and was wedged at a sharp angle, at the top, in a jumble of faded green stiffened silesia and snarled string. Hildegard Sessions could never remember this shade, or this window, in any other condition.

But her memory did not extend back very far. She was something less than ten years old.

What existed immediately about her appeared to her to be the whole world, and a perfectly normal and acceptable world. Her mother often told her that for the conditions of her life she ought to be "thankful," and Hilda was thankful in a childishly generous and unanalytical fashion. Sometimes, indeed, the heart beneath her faded, lifeless, filthy little garments almost burst with a swelling fear that she was not thankful enough—and that matters would grow worse.

She had been born to fear, she took fear quite for granted. The conversations she overheard were full of it, the chronic mood of her mother, and her father, and the neighbours was one of fear.

Poverty, with all its interlocking and branching terrors, was at the base of most of the apprehension; the Sessions and their neighbours were admittedly poor. Yet Hilda enjoyed life upon its present terms well enough, if that had been all. But her elders all appeared to be afraid of some darker darkness ahead, some quite unendurable—indeed, unspeakable—time of privation and suffering, and that frightened her. It made her little face anxious and grave, even in her tenth year, to hear so much about poverty, to think so much about it, to feel its hot, jealous breath just behind her odorous damp bed, to taste it in her spongy bakery bread and scant butter, to know that it was waiting outside—in the winter cold, or in the summer heat that smelled of decaying tomatoes and ash-pits—to dread it the more because it was so vague, and its coming so vague.

“You’re lucky to get anything!” Nelly Sessions said to her children, dispiritedly scraping the burned mush from the blackened saucepan. And to Hilda, sensitive, imaginative, apprehensive, the very burning of the food seemed part of poverty, the very smell of onion on the knife that cut her bread seemed inseparable from that danger that was always so close—danger of hunger, cold, bitter need.

It never quite caught them, poverty, much as her mother and the other women discussed its proximity. The neighbours stayed in their forlorn houses year after year, and there was always enough to eat, or almost enough, and even surprising money for queer things, sometimes: illustrated books that young men came to sell, and photographs of crimped little girls, and watermelons and gum and casual ice cream from carts.

Hilda would watch her mother with a burning agony of silent protest in her heart when Nelly opened her flat, ripped purse to invest in such luxuries. Had Mama forgotten the danger of starvation?

But she knew better than to speak. Nelly was nervous and quick tempered. She had had five children and that mysterious and often-mentioned thing “a miss” when Hilda was nine, going on ten, and this morning—a sharp, sweet

February morning—she had just told her oldest daughter that in September there would be a sixth child.

Hildegarde sat staring at her steadily, hooked into a favourite gawky attitude at the end of the kitchen table. She was wretched with sympathy. She was almost frightened at the contemplation of her mother's mood, and at her own utter inability to comfort her.

"Don't you care, Mama!" she offered timidly.

Nelly, standing at the window and staring out, gave a quick lift to one slatternly stout shoulder, and laughed bitterly and sharply.

"Talk's cheap!" she said despairingly, desperately. And Hildegarde, rebuffed, was silent.

The kitchen was warmed by the coal fire, now languishing in a dilapidated coal stove that stood upon three iron feet and one empty kerosene can in a corner of the room. It was a rusty stove, oozing warm ashes upon the warped iron rug beneath it; some of them had drifted to the chipped, rough boards of the bare floor beyond.

Nelly had wrenched a box apart for breakfast kindling; some of the fresh clean boards, with the nails sticking frankly from them, topped the litter of rubbish in the corner, where coal, newspapers, grocery bags, eggshells—where, in short, everything burnable had been flung for several weeks. Nelly was always on the point of cleaning up this corner, but Hilda never could remember her having done so. Some of the papers and strings and cracker boxes and chips had been there for actual years.

"God knows, I never claimed to be much of a house-keeper!" Nelly would say violently, sometimes, and Hildegarde would look at her with serious sympathy. This phrase seemed to cover the situation satisfactorily. God knew Mama had never *claimed* she was anything of a house-keeper. The rubbish corner of the kitchen, although always called the "wood box," had no box concealed under its mountain of fuel. But Nelly always felt that there was a box there, and that the box was merely overflowing, and

she could not have used any other spot for this particular purpose.

Otherwise, the kitchen was¹ furnished with a table upon which the red oilcloth had worn into wide gray holes that showed the dirt-packed cracks in the oily boards beneath, and with a variety of chairs, all usable, none whole, and a high chair, for a baby. The latter was nicked, scratched, porridge-spattered and worn to the collapsing point, but it still stood. Indeed, in it at this moment the baby so soon to be deposed was heavily collapsed and asleep—a fat two-year-old girl, wet, sour, filthy, bursting out of her worn, mud-coloured garments with a great display of creased leg and cushioned wrists, and with her face coated with dried mush, sugar, crumbs, tears, and the “drooling” that meant big teeth coming and that exhausted Hilda’s patience so often.

“Wipe Maybill’s face!” Nelly would command wearily. And Hilda, seizing the nearest available rag, even though it were her own limp apron or Mabel’s, would firmly dry the sore little mouth, against Mabel’s vigorous writhing and screaming.

But Mabel might drool unchallenged when she was asleep, and to-day Hilda had no eyes for her. She sat stupefied with a sense of fresh, and inevitable, calamity.

Not that she minded a new baby’s coming. Hilda had never known life at all without the heavy part-responsibility of her juniors, and she could not imagine it without them. Every household in the neighbourhood had a baby, and the little elder sisters, dragging them about upon lean little bent hips, boasted of them rather than depreciated their merits while they “minded” them in the long summer afternoons. Hilda adored Mabel, and thought the little sister’s first stammered syllables the most delicious sounds in the world. She would sprawl, eager, lean, self-forgetting, before the baby on the floor, coaxing her to repeat some phrase, her proud eyes glancing swiftly from her father to her mother, or to some neighbour’s face, her rich voice sunk to delicious coaxing:

"Ah, come on now, Maybill! What did the bow-wow say?—go on. Say it, honey! Say it for Sissy!"

No, Hilda, had her mother been happy about it, would have been quite pleased at the idea of still another little brother or sister. But, as was so often the case with events among her elders, the newcomer's advent appeared to be reviving in her mother's heart all those terrors that slept so lightly, those terrors about money and coal and shoes and food. And Hilda couldn't help there, because she didn't understand.

It worried her, too, that her mother seemed to feel herself injured; Mama's muttered bitter comments, this morning, had strangely to do with Parpa.

"I wish *he* had to have it once!" Nelly muttered, apron to her wet nose, tears dribbling forlornly between intervals of dry-eyed anger.

Hilda wound herself tighter about the chair.

"*Won't* he have it?" she asked, frowning in troubled perplexity and commiseration. "Won't it be his—like we all are?"

Nelly did not answer this except by a sniff, but Hilda hardly expected to be answered. Nobody ever answered her. She sat on, thinking about it. If they knew it all this time, why did they have to have it at all? Why couldn't they move away before it came? The Herseys could take it, or the Shedds.

She prayed wildly that Mama wasn't mad at Parpa. That was the situation that made life hard for Hilda. Sometimes they talked about their troubles as if they shared them, and she never minded that.

But when they quarrelled there were dark times in the ugly, box-like, six-room house. Hilda hated quarrelling at home as much as she enjoyed it on the part of her neighbours. When Ollie Hersey came home drunk and belligerent, it was a great treat to the Sessions children. The Curry's parpa had once electrified them all by being dragged off to spend three nights in jail for getting fresh with an officer.

But it was different when it was one's own parpa, sus-

picious and unreasonable even when one flew about in a perfect frenzy to please him, a parent extremely apt to catch one in that deadly grip that meant a strapping—for nothing! for nothing!—and that meant twisting and fighting, and screaming. “No, Parpa—no—stop—I never done it—I’ll kill myself!”

And that meant, too, that on the next day the Curry kids and the Hersey kids would tease one: “We heard you yelling last night—oo-oo, oo-oo, Hilda Sessions got a licking! She was yelling bloody murder for her father to quit!”

Then Hilda’s proud tawny head must be lowered in shame until it was Eric or Teeny Hersey’s turn to be whipped, or the turn of Jack, Lily, Maxine, or Helen Curry. In vain she told herself that the next time Parpa licked her she would keep her mouth shut. For it was not the pain that made her cry out; that she might have anticipated and conquered. It was the fright, the hideous anticipation of pain, the panic of being seized, helpless, doomed, struggling in those big hands, seeing her mother’s look of utter horror, hearing the younger children’s shrieks because Hilda was going to get licked again. It was the paralyzing effect of the talk that led up to the inevitable scene, the drunken, meandering talk that she could not control, and that made her heart hammer and hammer and hammer with a constantly increasing, unreasonable panic before the approaching crisis.

Thus her first thought of the new relative was an uneasy one. If Mama was mad at Parpa, and Parpa resented it——Hildegarda got to her feet and began a desultory attack upon the dishes in the sink. She didn’t like to think about it.

CHAPTER II

SHE was a tall child, beautifully built, and far prettier than her mother, who had been a flyaway, butterfly beauty twelve years ago. Hilda was as fair as Nelly, but her hair was heavier, thick, tawny, hanging in a splendid mane on her shoulders, with up-curling, pure-gold tips. Her lashes were heavy and upcurling, too, over serious gray-blue eyes faintly ringed in violet, her cheekbones were a trifle high-set, and the long, oriental eyes a trifle far apart, the nose was straight, with that hint of a tip that saves any face from heaviness, the mouth was wide and beautiful, over square, dazzling white teeth, and the chin firm and square and cleanly cleft. Hilda's head and throat were proudly set, she held herself royally, and even her mother, watching her grow, was not quite satisfied with the mere word "pretty" for her, and said vaguely that Hilda was a "stylish-looking" child.

She was a proud child, too, active, eager, anxious to be praised, jealous, and intelligent beyond her years, saucy, independent, and daring. Hilda led the neighbourhood gang, stole rides and apples, waded, screamed, climbed, adventured and explored the somewhat dreary world of San Bruno's shabbiest quarter, with all the native grace and speed and fearlessness of a young cat.

It was Hilda who screamed, "Give us a nickel, Mister!" to passers-by in the street, Hilda who had an insulting couplet to shout after every Negro or Chinese or intoxicated man who went by. She was always busy, always alert and ready; each day was to her a long adventure; the fear in which she had been born and bred, fear of want and trouble, fear of cops and whippings, fear of all the injustices that befall a superior child in a schoolful of mediocre children, only quickened her wits, and lent unending thrill to her escapades.

To-day was a Saturday; she was supposed to help Mama on Saturdays, besides helping her until the school bell was actually ringing every morning, and running errands and tending the younger children after school. Nelly's house-keeping was of the moment; Hilda could remember no meal when a last errand for bread or matches or a can of tomatoes had not been necessary. All the food in the house was eaten three times a day; there had to be fresh supplies of even such commodities as bread and butter, sugar and milk, every few hours.

Hildegarde slopped seriously in the gray, warm dishwater that was furred with cooling grease. Her fingers were greasy, the plates and lead spoons were greasy, and the damp cloth upon which she wiped them was gray and greasy, too. With the mush pot and spoon she could do nothing, so she abandoned them. The butt of the cigar her father had been smoking at breakfast rose to the surface of the water and floated there, and she scooped it up in a cup, and flung it into the bucket under the sink.

There was a smell of swill in the kitchen, souring, decayed vegetable matter, a smell of ashes and dust and cold coffee grounds, a smell, ammoniac and stifling, of babies' wet bedding, dried too quickly. But Hilda had grown up in this atmosphere, and she did not notice it.

Nelly, glancing apathetically at her now and then, sniffing now and then, remained at the window, looking out into a world flooded with California winter sunshine, clean and cold under a pale blue February sky. The Sessions house, and all the nearby houses, had been built before the streets had been surveyed and mapped; every other part of the town had improved, but not this.

It was still an unlovely jumble of cheap wooden buildings, some as humble and small as animals' lairs, some, like Nelly's, standing high and hideous upon a foundation of criss-crossed laths. Between the houses miserable fences languished, chicken pens, rusted implements, planks and wheels, coils of rotting rope and rolls of rusted wire.

Here and there there were forlorn bushes, garden bushes

mingled with the blighted mallow and willow sprouts, women more brave than wise had planted perishing fuchsias and geraniums, and rose vines that cowered and shrivelled under the long windy droughts and the smothering fogs.

And since Nelly and Rudy Sessions had come here to live, the sunken marshy ground north of them, the always dismal "Holler," had been made a dump; it was now almost levelled with the rest of the world, with its pyramids of ashes and cans. It spread about it an adour acrid and penetrating; all the Sessions children's clothing smelled eternally of the Dump.

Rents had gone down three years earlier, when the Dump came; the Sessions rent had gone down from twenty dollars to fourteen. Nelly had said that made no difference; of course, they would have to move, but she did not move, although even now she still occasionally looked at empty new houses, and raised Hilda's always alert hopes by designating bedrooms in them.

Nobody moved, and the Poles in the little brown shingled house with the goat tethered near it went boldly into the Dump, and returned with tin cans that, opened and flattened, roofed the brown shingled house and walled their lean-to, and with old mattress springs that, bedded in earth and wired together, composed a quite presentable fence about their truck patch.

But the Sessions did nothing like this; they despised the Dump. Mrs. Sessions had been a Crabtree, after all, and Hildegard had been born on her own father's ranch in the San Joaquin valley—a wonderful place, if her parents' accounts were to be trusted. Sometimes, when she felt rested and good-natured, Nelly would tell the children about the horses and cows and pigs, the fruit and cream and eggs of that amazing fairyland.

Of late, with Hildegard and the two older boys in school, and only five-year-old Stuart and the baby Mabel at home, Nelly had quite often felt rested and good-natured. She had more than once curled her stringy fair hair—that hair that had once been like a cloud of gold light about her head—and had bought herself a pair of shoes with tassels.

But to-day she looked tired and old, and seemed cross and low-spirited again.

"Mama," Hilda ventured, after a while, sloshing water to and fro in the coffee-pot whose lid was bound with dirty string, "why don't you have the baby right now, and then I could help you in vacation? If you wait until after vacation——"

She stopped speaking, her mother was not listening. She had turned to face the room, and had rested her head against the frame of the window, her eyes were far away, on some spot above the stove, her lips were trembling, and Hilda saw her nostrils flicker.

"My God, it don't seem like I can go through it again!" Nelly whispered. "We'll all be on the street if this goes on," she said.

This was one of the phrases that caused Hilda acute anxiety. She fixed her troubled eyes upon her mother, and watched her closely, her beautiful thick childish brows drawn together in a pained frown.

"Mama, do you have to have it if you don't want it?" she demanded, perplexed and solicitous.

Nelly sniffled, blinked, wiped her eyes with a sodden, lead-coloured corner of her apron, and gulped.

"Go down and get some potatoes up, Hilda," she said lifelessly.

Hilda obediently opened a door that gave upon steep cellar steps; the air, rushing up, was icy cold and smelled acridly of earth and cats. She shut the door quickly behind her, in response to a sharp command from her mother, and groped her way down cautiously, one hand spread on the rough boarding of the wall.

There was dim twilight below, admitted through holes in the foundation under the criss-crossed slats outside. The flooring was rough earth, in bumps and hollows. Somehow, to have these mysterious caves and hillocks down in the dark, under the rooms where one lived and ate and slept, was to Hilda unspeakably alarming.

The potatoes, twisted and dirty, were decaying in a box.

Hilda clawed them, feeling like worms against her fingers the pure cool shoots that grew like curls on them; that could grow even here in the shade. She gathered up her apron to carry them upstairs. There was a tiny whimpering and stir somewhere near, and a suffocating smell of wet rags. Little damp new cats were writhing in the dark; there were usually baby kittens down here. They would be staggering out on the ashes of the Dump in a few days, if her father found them.

Hilda trembled for them. She determined that if her father suspected their existence and questioned her, she would lie. Parpa would sling them all out in a jumble, blind, helpless, mewling—and let them stumble about until they died.

"Maybe she didn't want 'em," Hilda mused, as the lean mother cat arched herself against her little leg and purred madly, "maybe she didn't want 'em any more than Mama wants the new baby!"

She went upstairs with her potatoes. Mrs. Shedd, a neighbour, a lean woman with a blotched face and thin crinkly light hair, was sitting at the end of the kitchen table, staring steadily at her mother. Mabel was awake and eating something mysterious and lumpy, discovered in her own hand. From the yard Hilda could hear the voice of her oldest brother: "You gimme that, Lloyd—you gimme that, Lloyd—you gimme that now, Lloyd Sessions!" and Lloyd's bitter screams.

Mrs. Shedd was thin, stiff; Mama was soft and shapeless. Mrs. Shedd wore a percale dress, dingy and dirty, and the purple and black crocheted shoulder shawl that Gramma Shedd, before she died, had always had about her thin shoulders. Mama wore the dark red calico with the white sprig.

"For gaw's sakes," said Mrs. Shedd. And she and Mama looked at each other.

"Some have luck, some don't," Nelly Sessions said briefly.

"Do you have luck, Mama?" Hilda questioned in deep concern, hoping that the answer was yes.

"Yes, I have grand luck," Nelly answered morosely. But Hilda did not feel assured. She watched her mother's face in anxious sympathy.

"You poor thing," Mrs. Shedd said mildly. "There ought to be jails for fellers like that," she added thoughtfully.

"Fine chance of that, with the men running everything!" Nelly said bitterly, after a pause, with a mirthless laugh. "He'll eat *his* three meals a day, all right!" she commented.

"Oh, sure he will—and you'll catch it if they ain't on time," the other woman conceded dispassionately, after another silence. "Say, lissen," she said in an undertone, with a glance at Hilda. Hilda appreciated perfectly that she was not supposed to hear.

Informal as was Nelly's housekeeping, the problem of dishes and unmade beds was an ever-present burden upon the child's shoulders. She heard so much protest and complaint from her mother and the neighbouring women, she presumed that housework never was done completely, and never could be.

Still, she attacked her own share of it gallantly. Now she began to hack the rotted portions of the potatoes with a small broken-bladed knife. The knife made a little rasping sound upon the firmest of the potatoes, but many of them were soft and pliable as cheese, and these gave forth no sound. Hilda dumped them unpeeled into a saucepan of cold water, and covering them with a tin plate, set them on the cooling stove and proceeded to mend the fire. The gray ashes fluffed in her face when she put coal on the embers, and furred her thick long lashes with gray.

All this while, Mabel, apathetic and heavy, chewed vaguely at the pasty lump in her fat hand—it was a part of a doughnut, Hilda decided—and all this while Nelly and the neighbouring woman communicated with significant glances and monosyllables. Once Nelly, without moving her eyes from her neighbour's face, took off her buttonless, down-at-heel slipper, and folded the foot of her stocking firmly forward, over a hole that had apparently chafed her toe, and more than once she pulled out a long hairpin of imitation

tortoise-shell, and thoughtfully scratched her scalp beneath the dimmed gold of her disorderly hair.

"Mis' Curry done it, and she wasn't laid up but two days, and she feels grand!" Mrs. Shedd said once. Nelly made no answer; her faded eyes, in her full, pathetically disappointed face, studied the other woman's eyes dubiously. She walked about the kitchen, sat down at the table.

She was thirty-four years old; she looked more than fifty. Her teeth were only dark jagged peaks between the sharp lines of the mouth that had been like an opening rose to Rudy Sessions's kisses a few years ago. Her face was fat, shapeless, pallid, her figure was gone, the breasts hung flaccidly, the hips bulged, the stout arms that emerged from the calico sleeve were freckled and covered with visible light hairs; Nelly's hands were grimed and scarred, and her nails split and neglected.

"Either way, you might die, and I don't know what he'd do if you was taken," the neighbour presently offered, with a mild sigh.

"Him?" Hilda heard her mother say roundly, with a sort of hard, indifferent philosophy. "He'd marry again, and she'd look out for him like I've done."

"That's the men for you," Mrs. Shedd commented. "They certainly have everything that's going in *this* world. 'If the men had the job, there'd be one kid in every family,' my mother used to say."

"I've heard Rudy's mother say that," Nelly said, with a rueful laugh. "Oh, it makes me *sick*!" she added, in a bitter undertone. "It makes me sick—coming just now, when I began to feel so good, and it seemed like we'd gotten a sort of start."

Her lips trembled again, and she began to push her finger back and forth on the worn red oilcloth of the kitchen table, staring blindly down at it through a film of tears.

"That's the world for you!" Mrs. Shedd said.

"He's always—terrible—when I'm like this," Nelly confessed, in a shaken whisper.

Hilda, sucking the finger that had been penetrated by a

nail during the handling of kindling, pretended not to hear. But she was passionately sympathetic and bewildered and absorbed.

"They all are," agreed Mrs. Shedd. "I carried Elsie three months before I got up my nerve to tell Sam . . ."

Hildegarde, hanging a mud-coloured dishcloth to dry, could identify Elsie Shedd. She was the Shedd child that about matched Hilda's brother Lloyd in years. But why should any child's mother carry her for three months, unless she was crippled? And how could any man be so blind as not to see that somebody right in his house always had a baby in her arms?

"Hilda, you run get a pound of sausage, and take Maybill," Nelly said, suddenly catching her daughter's intense glance. "And you watch Beyermann, and see he don't weigh his thumb in the scales, either!"

"Is Parpa comin' home to lunch?" Hilda asked, wiping Mabel's screaming and ducking mouth with a wet rag, and taking a reef here and there in the child's soggy, iron-gray raiment. "She's sopping," she observed.

"That don't matter, put her coat on," Nelly directed impatiently. "Hurry up, Hilda, it's after eleven," she urged, as Hilda put the child down on the floor, and began to force Mabel's fat, limp arms into those of a stiff, brief, heavy coat streaked and spotted with food. She snatched a safety-pin from her own breast, and the red calico gown fell open, as Hilda struggled to adjust an enormous old crocheted "fascinator" about Mabel's fat, expectant face, flushed like a dewy apricot under the recent cleaning.

"Go by-by?" Mabel gritted through sore gums, in immense satisfaction.

"Go by-by, honey," Hilda, one slim little arm stretched straight toward the ceiling as she struggled into her own too-small coat, answered affectionately. The older sister turned back, when they were at the door, and the cold outer air was rushing into the kitchen. "Mama, I haven't got any money," she suggested.

"Oh, for God's sake, get *out*, and charge it, and shut that

door!" Nelly screamed, her patience suddenly exhausted, and the burst of anger a real physical relief. Hilda departed in such haste that Mabel stumbled, and fell into the yard, her screams echoing through the kitchen. "They get on my nerves something terrible when I'm like this," Nelly said, half apologetic, half complaining. "I just feel as if I'm going out of my senses. I couldn't eat nothing this morning."

"I never can," observed Mrs. Shedd.

"Coffee——" Nelly mused. "It makes me feel sick all over just to smell it." She planted her elbows on the table, sunk her head in her hands. "I'm always sick the whole time, and I have awful bad times," she said despairingly. "When Cliff was born I had two convulsions, and the doctor said I shouldn't ever have another child—when Maybill come I walked the floor three days—I didn't have no stren'th."

"My God, ain't it awful? I done that with Carrie," Mrs. Shedd said resignedly.

"Hour after hour, I walked this floor," Nelly said in a whisper. "Once I seen myself in the mirror—looked like I was made of putty. All afternoon, and all night, and up to morning, and then through the whole day until twenty minutes past eleven that night . . ."

Her voice fell; she was talking to herself.

"It's awful," Mrs. Shedd said, pale with memories.

"It's awful when you haven't got no stren'th, nor no clo'es for it, nor any money, nor a woman to help out here," Nelly whispered. And after a long silence she said again: "It don't seem like this time I could go through it!"

CHAPTER III

THE day was stingingly sharp; the cold air smote Mabel's fat wet legs and made them burn, and Mabel wept as she stumbled along. It was three blocks to the store, and Hilda had to kneel several times beside her little sister, during their slow progress, and comfort her. A cold, low breeze was ruffling the roadside puddles; the sun shone brightly, and there was a film of new grass around fence posts and under bare bushes; but it was cold—cold, no real spring yet.

Sudden wild airs blew newspapers crackling across the irregular way that was half a street and half a road, and ballooned shirts and nightgowns on a clothesline like the sails of a galleon. Hilda looked down toward the bay, beyond the railroad tracks—the pale blue water under a paler blue sky was flowing—flowing in steely ripples. A passenger train went majestically by, across the cindery refuse and grime of sheds and tracks, the shining engine was coughing forth staccato “tuff-tuff-tuffs” that delighted Mabel, and the baby gurgled interestedly, with tears still wet upon her fat cheeks, and her wet red rubber mouth drooling.

The Los Angeles train, making its daily run from San Francisco, twelve miles north, to Los Angeles, five hundred miles down the coast, Los Angeles was only a name to Hilda Sessions. But she loved this morning train, tossing fresh little puffs of white smoke into the air, so busy and capable and sure of itself, thundering along its appointed and certain pathway, between the cinders and the dump, the rabble of disreputable houses and sheds and fences, crazy chimneys and swill barrels and mud and weeds, beside the shabby muddy stretch of the cindery beach and the blue water.

Men and women looked out of its big windows sometimes;

incredible creatures, humans, perhaps, but humans with all the supernatural powers of fairies—humans who could command dresses and hats and books, and who could fly through one's life so luxuriously, bound for that mysterious southern goal called Los Angeles.

Hilda Sessions, planted squarely upon her small feet, the wind ruffling her magnificent tawny mane, her spotted coat too tight, her baggy underwear dull gray and full of holes, her small hands sore from burns and scratches and dish-water, felt something swell within her when the train went by.

It stood for the world outside her cage; it was the window through which she glimpsed infinite glories and far spaces.

More than once a traveller waved at her, smiled at her, the gallant childish figure with the proudly held head, the straight shoulders, the jumble of incredible clothing. And when that happened Hilda's deep blue eyes shone with mysterious radiance for hours.

When the train was gone this morning she let Mabel climb the lowest rung of the Francos' fence and look at their cow. The cow's kingdom was a small yard, churned and black underfoot, with stagnant yellow pools in the hoof-marks. She was a notoriously cross cow, and she usually went hastily and with whisks of her dirty tail into her little shed in one corner when children stared at her. But sometimes she hooked the fence, a thrilling sight until old man Franco rushed cursing out to disperse the audience.

The Francos had an arbour, bare now except for the tangle of naked vine stems, and a tomato patch that was now only barren clods. An enormous barrel on a little platform stood behind the shanty. Barrel and platform were stained a dull purple. The Francos were Eyetalians, they had a shrunk, dark, desperate child of nine, who could sometimes be goaded into entertaining furies by the epithet "dago kid."

"Dirky—kee-kee?" Mabel said hopefully of the cow.

"Yes, she's a dirty, kee-kee cow," Hilda agreed, eyeing the animal's crusted, damp flanks disapprovingly. "Come on, darling, Mama's in a hurry." And panting, she carried

fat Mabel over a bad bit of road and set her down upon the plank walk that led to the butcher's.

There were customers ahead of her in the little meat market; shawled women who murmured shamefacedly as they looked at the pot roast or hamburg steak. Muttons, one skinned, one still wearing a coat of gray wool, were hung casually above the butcher's head by a slit shank, close to the dirty hoof.

Beyermann was fat, dirty, out of breath, tied into an apron streaked with upper layers of blood and grease over lower layers of blood and grease. His head, growing bald under light fuzzy curls, was beaded with sweat even on this cold day. The sharp-smelling turnips were beaded, too, and the window. An enormous male cat, with a square, tufted face, was walking slowly about in the cold sunshine that lay on the floor, where tiny bits of meat and splintered bone showed clean pink and white in the scattered sawdust.

Mabel fell with drooling love upon the cat, but Hilda was all business now, eyeing the sausages sharply. They seemed to be oddly shrunken sausages this morning, and on their dark red smoothness there were shadows—purple shadows.

Mrs. Foster, who kept boarders, was buying pork. Ten cents a pound, huh? Mrs. Hersey sighed, and smiled deprecatingly at the chops. All bone and fat. "Let's see how much you're goin' to trim off, Heinie," she suggested.

The butcher shrugged, made a slash with his big knife on the round of his block that had been splintered and soaked into soft red powder on top.

"Gimme seven for fifteen cents," the woman said, "and throw in an onion and some parsley."

The butcher worked fast, once stopping to mop his wet brow with his rolled-up sleeve. Seven chops, two onions, parsley, and a turnip that Mrs. Hersey put into the coarse brown paper herself. Fifteen cents; he jerked open the cash drawer with the little wooden cups in it. "Thanks," he said, rapping his block with the back of his cleaver, and eyeing Hilda expectantly.

Her purchase was fifteen cents, too; it went into the book.

Ten cents for sausages, five cents for lard. Everything was sold in units of five cents when Hilda was ten. The copper penny had not as yet made its way across the Rocky Mountains.

When she got home her father was there. His presence always inspired her with a sense of wariness, of danger, especially on Saturdays, when he came home to shave and get clean, somewhere around noon. Usually he went away again at three o'clock, after a scene with Mama about his money. Hilda's heart sank as she went in.

He was a small, fair man, with strong glasses, big teeth, and a sandy moustache. His much-polished shoes were crinkled on his lean feet. He wore a shabby, bright brown suit old enough to betray its cheapness, and a knitted tie; he was sharply and watchfully chewing gum.

"Thought your mama told you to hurry?" he said, with a sort of leisurely menace, and Hilda could hear the little squeaks of the gum between his teeth as he spoke.

"I had Maybill," she excused herself fearfully, hastily.

"What do you think, Rudy?" Nelly said forlornly, from the sink, anxious eyes on his face. She was evidently pursuing some previous topic; Hilda was glad to wrench off her coat and make herself useful and inconspicuous. "Change the baby," Nelly commanded her in an annoyed aside, and Hilda gladly obeyed, laying the rolling Mabel flat on her back on the floor, and kneeling beside her.

Rudy leaned back in his chair, chewing, his eyes speculative. Like all the husbands of Nelly's acquaintance, he never did anything himself in the house. That was not his responsibility. To change a child's garments, to wipe a plate, pick up a piece of rubbish or straighten a chair never occurred to Rudy. He might have been the picture of an insignificant, pompous, vain little unsuccessful real estate agent's clerk, rather than the living man, as he sat there waiting for his meal. That what had to be done in the cluttered kitchen might be done more easily, more happily, with the help of his own two perfectly competent hands was unthinkable to him. He was in no sense expected to be a companion, a helper to

his wife. She was his woman, and this was her job, that was all.

The little boys had come in, their small hands burned and raw with cold, their noses running. Three fat, pallid little boys, with grimy scalps showing through their ashen fair hair. Cliffy, eight, Lloyd, six, Stuart, five. Lloyd differed from his brothers only in that he had sore, red-rimmed eyes; he had always had sore eyes. Otherwise, they were all pretty, but not one with the definite glow and fire, the proud chin, the straight shoulders, the sparkling blue eyes and up-curving thick black lashes of Hildegard.

The little boys were very quiet when their father was in the house; they sat solemnly eating bakery bread and sugar, their eyes on his face. He often whipped them; sometimes he would whip all four of the older children furiously, the expectant ones crying in line while their fellows suffered, but he never whipped Mabel, who was his favourite, and who now, when she was dry and clean, sat in his lap, his unimportant, unshaven, weak chin resting against her blonde tunnel of straight, recently combed hair.

"If you don't feel like you understood enough about it, Rudy," Nelly persisted miserably, "Mamie Shedd would just as lieves tell you what she told me——"

But Rudy didn't like this suggestion; he knew everything. He blinked through his glasses loftily.

"I know—*all*—about it," he said, chewing. "I'm just thinking whether I think it's a good idea or not."

Nelly began to hook the sausages out of hot water; she stirred a few of the potatoes that had been sliced into a frying pan.

"Get out of Parpa's lap, Maybill," she said fretfully; "leave him eat."

"Leave her be!" Rudy said, with a snarl, instantly hostile.

He rolled his gum with wet finger-tips, stuck it on the window casing, fell upon sausages and potatoes and the strong tea that scented the kitchen so deliciously.

Nelly, drinking something hot from a handleless cup, con-

tinued to watch him with uneasy intensity, one flank propped against the sink, her body drooping shapelessly.

"Nope," Rudy presently said decisively and briefly; "I hate that kind of thing!"

Nelly made no answer, but the hot resentful colour stained her cheeks in two round spots of scarlet. She continued to stand at the sink, staring steadily at him.

Rudy doubled a spongy piece of bread about a lump of butter, gulped it, and looked at her dispassionately, without a trace of guilty consciousness. Through his strong glasses the little man stared her down.

"I wish it was you!" she whimpered, in weak tears, turning her back.

"I wish those damn' women wouldn't waste your whole morning, when you ought to be getting your housework done, streaking in here with all kinds of crazy yarns!" Rudy countered irritably.

Cliffy was seized with a sudden spasm of coughing—coughing—coughing. Stuart's nose was running freely over his upper lip; Nelly wiped it on her apron. Rudy put Mabel into her high chair and took the kettle, preparatory to going upstairs to shave.

Outside, the bright cold day had darkened suddenly; the February sun was behind a cloud. Hilda, dividing a sausage with a brother, heard her father's step ascending the carpetless stair and breathed freer. She watched her mother apprehensively as Nelly began to slam through the dishes.

"What did you want Parpa to leave you do, Mama?" she asked cautiously, wiping plates.

Nelly's heart was sick for sympathy, and the exquisite face at her elbow was glowing with it. But the mother did not answer at once. First she jerked the two older boys into their dirty coats and sent them to the store for soda—Nelly was almost living upon soda in these days—and then she turned Mabel and Stuart loose in the yard, where they went toward some other babies who were bundled, red-nosed, wind-blown, and at large among the cans and fences, in cold afternoon shadow.

"Mama wanted to go see a doctor," she said then to Hildegard, with a cautious glance upward to indicate that Rudy must not hear. "And maybe the doctor would of told Mama—do you see?—that there wouldn't have to be a baby next September, and that would of made poor Mama glad."

Hilda could only look puzzled sympathy and distress.

"Mamma loves all of you," Nelly went on loyally; "there was never a mama loved her children more."

Hilda, touched, embraced her awkwardly.

"Would the doctor have taken the baby to be his baby, Mama?" she asked eagerly. Nelly looked a little startled.

"Maybe," she said uneasily. "You mustn't say anything about this, Hilda," she charged the child hastily.

"Was it Doctor Boone, Mama?"

"No—" Nelly again looked nervously about her, lowered her voice—"no, it was a doctor Mis' Shedd knows," she said.

"Maybe he takes *their* babies!" Hilda deduced brilliantly.

"They have no baby but Elsie, and she's six."

"Six!" Nelly said slowly. "Yes, I know . . ." she mused aloud.

They dragged on at the eternal pots and baby garments and ashes. Hilda went to the store for a cake of yellow soap, and came back, and began to sweep the floor. The fresh afternoon air had given her a brilliant colour; her gold mane seemed crisper, curlier, silkier than ever.

"Hilda, don't you ever get married," Nelly presently said, from the rocker, where she was busy with a tangle of hopeless hose. "Now, mind, you'll want to—like all girls do—but you take my word for it, men are all alike, and the minute you're married your troubles begin!"

"I'm not going to get married," Hilda assured her across the broom handle. "I'm going to teach school."

"That's what *I* thought," Nelly said. "I had a job, too. I had my mother and my sister Alice and my brother George—George is coining money now, they say, and he lives in Detroit—you've seen Aunt Alice at Aunt Ernestine's wedding—"

"At San Rafael," Hilda interpolated.

"At San Rafael, yes. I had them all," Nelly resumed darkly, "and I had the best father any girl ever had—he's with your Uncle George, in the East. He was an angel; nobody ever got an ugly word out of *him!*"

There were tears in her eyes.

"Didn't he lick you when you got fresh?" Hilda asked.

"He never licked nobody, my father didn't," Nelly answered passionately. "And he never—" she glanced at the upstairs door—"he never touched—nothing, either," she said significantly.

Hilda could not imagine so strange a father. No lickings—no drink. . . .

"But your time'll come, Hilda," her mother predicted sombrely. "You'll think some feller's just perfection, you'll be crazy about him, you won't be able to wait until you can get married—and then you'll be just where I am."

The droning voice ceased, she rocked, stretched the boggy heels of children's stockings upon her worn hands. Hilda mused darkly. She wouldn't. She *wouldn't*.

"I will not," she muttered sulkily to herself, at the sink. "You see if I do!"

But almost instantly she was thinking keenly and swiftly of other things, of that enormous world that she alone inhabited. If Parpa went out, as he always did Saturday afternoons, and didn't come back, Hilda would go over to the Muller's back yard. Mrs. Muller had a cancer, and was in a hospital, and nobody would be about the Muller house to annoy Hilda. The Mullers had a little hay-barn where Hilda's charges, Mabel and Stuart, would play happily even upon this harsh, cold afternoon, and lying in the muck of the Muller's back yard was an immense iron hoop. Mounted on this hoop, and firmly holding to the stakes of the Muller's high chicken-yard fence, Hilda could gracefully gallop miles and miles through a world of hostile Indians, pursuing tigers, or admiring fellow horsewomen.

"Good gracious, how beautifully that little girl rides," all the voices would say. And sometimes they would add, "And hear her sing!"

For Hilda, bouncing upon the Mullers' iron hoop, did indeed sing loudly: "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean." She also sang a song she had learned from hearing Lizzie Catlin sing it so often on Friday afternoons in school, "Slumber on, my little gipsy sweetheart." Lizzie, with long, stiff black curls, was deeply admired by Hilda.

Maybe, if she trailed the babies down past the Chinese vegetable garden, the old Chinaman would give her a length of sugar cane; he often did. And if the gently springing hoop was ecstasy, the fact of chewing upon the wet, sweet sugary fibres of the cane while riding redoubled even that.

Hilda had only discovered the possibilities of the Mullers' back yard a few weeks ago; old Muller was there all week, and unfriendly to visitors. But his little boy, his only child, had provided the neighbourhood with a tremendous sensation by being smashed flat by a truck a few months ago, and now his wife was in a city hospital, and he went to see her every Saturday and Sunday.

His cottage was one of the few well-kept ones of Hilda's knowledge. Fences and hedges made it a safe retreat, and she guarded her discovery of it jealously. She hummed as she worked.

"You'll have to go to the store, Hilda," her mother said.

"Orrite."

"We oughter have some meat in the house for to-morrow—get a pot roast, and I'll make dumplings, if I feel good."

"Orrite."

"And I wisht you'd take Maybill and Stewy," Nelly pursued discontentedly. "They'll have me crazy, underfoot all afternoon."

"Orrite, Mama." Hilda in imagination was already on the hoop, her hands grasped the friendly roughness of the chicken-yard laths; gracefully, swimmingly, up and down she went, her hair lifting in a wave off her neck, falling upon her shoulders again, her eyes roving the unfamiliar prairies all about. The dreary little houses of North San Bruno, bleak in cold February light, the cindery rambling roads

with their mud holes, the sheds and fences, the cold stretch of water, rippling in the slow bay tides, the railroad track with its gleam of blue steel in a spring sunset, these were all transformed. These were jungles, deserts, these were the trackless forests where wild animals roved. Or sometimes they were a public park in Lima, with a statue of a man on horseback in it.

There was a photograph in the dreary front room Nelly called the "parlour," where Lloyd and Cliffy slept upon a dark odorous lounge that was never closed and rarely made, a picture that had belonged to Grandma Sessions, a faded photograph cheaply matted and framed. It was of a public park in Lima, with an equestrian statue at its handsome wrought-iron gate. Hilda did not know what or where Lima was, but she imagined herself sometimes elegantly riding her horse past this statue and into the bowery park.

"Answer me!" her mother said sharply. The child roused herself with a start. The dingy walls of the kitchen enveloped her again. Ashes, swill, damp bedding dried too fast, stale coffee, strong tea, cold water running from the tap, warm, gray fuzzy water in the dishpan. "I ast you did you hear your parpa go out the front door," Nelly repeated.

Hilda cocked her head, the royal mane falling in a rich mass on her right shoulder. She listened, eyes toward the hall door. At the same moment the footsteps of Rudy were heard descending the stairs, and she could turn to her dishpan again.

He came in, shaven, his cheeks smoothly glowing, his blond hair wet and combed slickly away from a part, his derby hat in his hand.

"Want to put a button on for your boy, Nelly?" he said, coming to stand close beside her, with a portion of his light overcoat extended.

Nelly snapped a length of thread, licked and twisted it, screwed her eyes at a needle.

"Where going, Rudy?"

"I've got a customer coming out from town. I may be a

little late. Hilda, you'll clean my room up, will you? I left a lot of dirty water and so on up there. Do that, now, don't forget—I don't want to come back and find it like that, and Mama don't feel any too well, she can't do it."

"Orrite, Parpa."

"Don't go over to Regan's, Rude," Nelly urged, in a low tone, as she made a rapid winding motion of thread about the button and glanced up into his face. He smiled good-naturedly.

"Don't you worry!" he said.

"I'm not worrying," Nelly said, warning, "but all is, those boys get you over there, and start a poker game, and they work you for a sucker!"

A little colour crept to his cheek-bones, and his eyes narrowed.

"Oh, they do, do they? You know all about it, don't you?"

His tone was light, amiable, but Hilda felt her heart plunge. This was the beginning.

"My God, I *ought* to know about it!" Nelly answered, a hint of something shrill, something bitter, coming suddenly into her voice. She rose, restlessly went to the window, restlessly seated herself at the table. "We've lived here four years, and there hasn't been a Saturday night, hardly, that you haven't gone over there—wasting your money—poisoning your stomach——" she said, miserable and desperate.

Rudy came to the sink, took a glass of water, drained it, and looked from his wife to his daughter.

"Hilda don't think she's got such a terrible papa!" he suggested, unruffled.

"Your children aren't so crazy about you!" Nelly muttered darkly.

Rudy smiled at Hildegard in entire good-humour; the smile invited her to share his indulgence to her mother.

"You said you'd have some money for me, to-day, Rudy," his wife, resting her sick head on her hand, and her elbow on the kitchen table, added lifelessly.

"Well," Rudy answered unexpectedly, "I have."

He took out his purse. "How'd twenty suit you?" he asked.

Twenty dollars! Hilda's anxious heart soared with relief. This *must* make Mama happy!

But Nelly looked dark and dissatisfied still. She put her freckled plump hand over the money—a gold ten, two gold fives, without raising her eyes to her husband's cheerful face. She began to roll the coins, looking down; her lashes were beaded with tears.

"A lot of good it'll do, if I'm going to be sick again," she said thickly, resentfully.

"Oh, for God's sake, can't you talk about anything else but that?" Rudy demanded irritably. "Other women don't make such an eternal damn' fuss about it! You don't hear me fussing about all I've got to do! I'm not any better pleased than you are—and *I'm* the one that carries the responsibility! All you do is sit at home and raise a row about it. You must think I'm awfully stuck on this place to stand for it."

Usually, her mother broke furiously into the discourse at this point. But Hilda was relieved to see that evidently her mother was too low-spirited to quarrel to-day. She merely sat at the littered sticky table, her lashes wet, her puffy, pale hand with the light hairs and the freckles on it twisting the bright coins, her slow tears falling.

Rudy could talk himself out of breath, and out of the kitchen indeed, which he presently did, with a bracing, "Now, pull yourself together, Nelly. It's enough to make a man sick, coming home to a woman who's for ever whining and kicking. Hilda, don't you forget to clean up upstairs, unless you want a good strapping again."

"I won't, Parpa!" Hilda assured him fervently.

When her father had gone, her mother sat on—on, at the table, rolling and spinning the coins on the worn red oilcloth. Her face was blank with misery and stupor; the soda fizzed in the cup of hot water at her elbow—died; the afternoon sun slanted mercilessly into the disorderly room. Bright clean dancing winter sunshine through a filthy pane, it fell upon

broken chair legs and the rusty, ash-powdered stove, and the furry gray dishwater, and the jumble of rubbish in the wood-box corner.

"Stop at Beyermann's, Hilda," Nelly said languidly, painfully, from the table, panting as she spoke, "and pay him five on account, and send home some meat. And pay five at the grocery—he was awful fresh yesterday. And for goodness' sake, take Stewy with you and Maybill; I'm going to lay down awhile on the boys' bed."

She turned toward the musty, chilly, bare-floored front room, where the double lounge stood in cold afternoon gloom; its tousled sheets and blankets holding no warmth, no invitation to her utter weariness. Hilda saw the faded, untidy blonde head, already graying, go down upon a limp ticking pillow without a slip, saw her mother jerk a snarled blanket half over her, twist, sigh, jerk at it again, before she herself was off, off into the freedom of Saturday afternoon with Parpa well out of the way, off for a gallop through tropic jungles peopled, like the pictures in the geography, with bushy-headed lions and flat-faced alligators—off for the public park of Lima, where the iron horse eternally caracolled, and the iron gates eternally welcomed a daring rider, with her hair blown in a February wind.

CHAPTER IV

YOU get into trouble with any boy once, and, big as you are, I'll lick the tar out of you!" Rudy assured her.

Hildegarde looked at him superbly, amusedly. She was taller than her father, at fifteen, strong and straight and fearless, and she was afraid of Rudy no longer. Indeed, she was fond of him, or thought she was, for no better reason than that he was father and she daughter. The memory of his old injustices to her had faded with a thousand other stupid and half-comprehending little-girl recollections, nor was she experienced enough, or even sufficiently interested in her parents, to perceive that they were wronging her still, if in slightly less obvious ways.

They were simply Mama and Pop; she had boasted shrilly about them to other little girls, years ago, even when her small person was stinging from undeserved whippings, was dirty, badly nourished, and generally neglected, even when her home was a pig-pen filled all day long and half the night with foul odours and foul words. And she felt a certain complacent regard for them still.

All the men of the neighbourhood drank and scolded and licked the kids, all the women were slatternly and dirty and idle, and whined about maternal cares.

And if ever a family at all different in its habits moved to the region of the Dump, it was not for long. There would be clean little girls hanging clean wet wash upon lines, a clean woman paying her expenses daily, a clean baby in a perambulator, for a few weeks. And then a "To Let" sign appeared where the "stuck-up" intruders had lived. And Hilda would tell stories about them with enormous relish, to the undying amusement of her audience of women.

"Lissen, he useter come home early, and help her wash the didies!"

"Oh, my *Gawd!*" Mrs. Curry or Mrs. Hersey or Mrs. Shedd would say with magnificent smiles of contempt. And perhaps Nelly, labouring toward a sixth confinement, or a seventh, would pant humorously, sneeringly: "Wouldn't you think a man could find something to do that he wouldn't hang around like a regular Mollie! I know what Rudy Sessions would give me if I ast him to rub out any of the baby's clo'es for me!"

And Hilda would bridle with pride; her father would give her mama a black eye, you bet, before he'd be such a Mollie!

Rudy was her standard of manhood; Nelly of womanhood. All other men and women she saw varied from the normal exactly as they varied from Rudy or Nelly. She did not analyze or idealize her parents, being at this time too busy analyzing and idealizing her own beautiful young self; she merely felt that they were unchangeable, complete, experienced. They fought, and called each other names, and Hilda trembled. They were amicable again, without any fuss of reconciliation or explanation, and she was happy. Mama shouldn't nag, of course, and Pop shouldn't drink, but they did nag and drink, and there you were! And in pleasant moments Mama always said that Pop was one of the smartest men in the business, and the best dresser in San Bruno, and Pop boasted of his own and Mamma's ancestry; the Sessions family and the Crabtree family were important families. Nothing the Sessions ever did could make them common, like some of their neighbours.

Sometimes all the children were cleaned, the little boys dressed in new suits a little too big, and squeaky new shoes—Mabel even had white kid and black patent leather shoes once with "tossils," but the boys and Hilda and her brothers wore a cheaper type called "pebble goat"—and the Sessions family walked out into the pleasant Sunday afternoon stir of San Bruno. Nelly would lead the staggering old baby, eclipsed by an embroidered collar, and Rudy would carry the flowing cape and collapsed satin cap that concealed the

new one. Hilda's mother crimped and frizzed her light hair on these occasions, and looked flushed and weary, as well she might, in the unwonted glory of high satin stock, flaring five-gored serge skirt that swept the ground on all sides, and enormous sailor hat, set high on puffs of hair.

And whenever they met an acquaintance Rudy was delightfully gay and kind, and proud of his family, and Hilda swelled with pride, too. Pop had been ugly last night, flushed and odorous of beer, quarrelling sullenly with Mama, and he had dealt out whippings with a ready hand; the frantic implorings and coughings and sobbings of Cliffy and Lloyd were still in her ears; they always turned her heart to water.

But a spring Sunday, with Mama's stewed chicken and a big bakery cake in the house for dinner, and everybody out for a trolley ride in the early afternoon, was one of their happy times.

And it was easy, as she grew tall and strong and wise, for Hilda to be happy. Hers was a heart in which the sun always shone; she was naturally gay, eager, interested, anxious to help and smooth; her mother and her teachers and her neighbours found one word for Hilda in her very babyhood, and never changed it—the word “sweet.”

The beginning of her life as an individual, as something else than a dirty, overburdened, neglected little girl, was when Rudy discovered her. She was about twelve then.

He began to laugh at her narratives instead of telling her to shut up. He began to praise her. “Why don't you act like Hilda?—she obeys, she hurries, she has some sense!” he would say to the younger children. Hilda, busy at the dishpan, murmuring comfort to the attendant and lymphatic Mabel, would be conscious that her father was watching her proudly, if covertly.

“You get all your blocks together in the box, honey,” Hilda would say in her motherly voice, “and then Hilda'll come and play with you!”

And she would wring a dirty rag capably, invert the dinted, nicked gray dishpan, draw the shade. And then her

glorious eyes would be raised—she couldn't help it!—to meet her father's glance, and she would smile questioningly under his approving look. Had Pop been noticing all this?

Rudy, his crossed legs high in air, his feet on the table, the sheets of the Sunday morning newspaper littering the floor, in turn couldn't help showing her how he felt, even if it was going—as Nelly prophesied—to spoil her.

"You're awful patient with the kids, Hilda—Pop will bring you a present this week, you wait and see. I wish to God your mother had your way with them!"

"Mama's sick so much," Hilda would plead, her heart swelling with the wine of praise, her eyes tender. At twelve—and thirteen—new consciousness awakened within her: she was beautiful, she was popular, she was smart. Her life began to seem like a fascinating part she had to play, a leading part, that kept her always in the very centre of the story.

"Mama," Rudy would say, meeting his daughter's toleration with an equal mildness, "is the kind that makes an awful fuss about every little thing!" Hilda's answering glance, her reluctant, "I know," admitted her already wiser than Mama.

Both voices would be lowered on these admissions. Nelly always weak and wretched, in spite of the tremendous bottles of a patent specific she took in big tablespoonsful, would be lying down upstairs.

Mabel had a successor now; little George Dewey Sessions was almost four years old, a pale, damp, heavy boy, always grimed from long contact with dirty floors. Even George had had a successor, a crying, spotted, lead-coloured baby, who lived three months, three wretched months of curds and wailing and convulsions. Nelly had named him Lyddell, and had not been well since the shock and sorrow of his death, or perhaps of his birth. She dragged about forlornly, listening to Rudy and the children rather than speaking herself, and often, often reaching to the shelf above the sink, where the big bottle, with its medicine-streaked label, stood, and slopping the brown mixture into the spoon that was

never washed between doses, and so came to be coated thick with crystals of brown sugar.

But Hilda had done more with her father already than Nelly ever could do. She was beautiful, sweet, and sane; he dreaded losing her approval, dreaded the possibility of her coming to share her mother's opinion of him. As imperceptibly as she grew to radiant girlhood, Rudy changed, too. Sometimes he took her out on a Saturday night, a shy, glowing, thrilled companion, to whom the cheaply lighted streets and candy and shoe-stores windows were fairyland, and a Nickelodeon paradise. He got her a cheap little blue serge coat with brass buttons, and a blue fuzzy tam, and she stepped along at his side fairly springing with inner joy, and as regally sure of herself as if these had been purple and sables.

Sometimes he would introduce her to a man friend, who would make kindly talk with the little girl. And Hilda, her exquisite face framed in the leonine mane of her shining hair, and her starry eyes flashing under the gracious loop of the blue tam, would say:

"Eighth grade—I skipped a grade! I'll graduate this year, I guess. I had a lovely teacher, and when I told her I didn't know anything about per cents she said she'd show me in two weeks! Hist'ry—oh, I love it; I got ninety-eight. I said I wisht I'd lived in the times of Marie Antoinette—they cut her head off—oh, she was beautiful!"

And this, delivered in her delicious voice, with a childish rush of eagerness to share the joy of her life with anybody and everybody, always won from the new admirer a side glance, full of amused significance, for Rudy. He lived, nowadays, for these glances of amazed appraisal of his child.

"Where'd *you* get this gorgeous kid, Sessions?" the looks asked. And Rudy would shrug his shoulder, suffocated with pride. He showed Hilda's report cards, Hilda's even, characterless handwriting, to any one who would look. He told the child long pathetic stories of his own youth, its frustrated promise, its brilliance quenched by the double misfortune of dishonest business associates and family cares. Hilda

came to believe that it was her mother's yearning for the city that had induced poor Pop to sell the mythical and wonderful ranch when she was five; she came to see in him a sort of martyr to his family, baffled, denied, burdened at every turn. The insignificant, boastful, arrogant little man became fine in her eyes.

He praised her when she cleaned the kitchen that was the living room, too, and Hilda, pressing her brothers into service with water, and garbage buckets, and ash cans, and kindling, praised them in turn. Nelly said feebly that God knew she had good children. Hilda and Rudy began to talk about moving away from the Dump, into some decent place. And the child, with her glorious mop of bright hair, her glorious deep blue eyes with upcurling, smoky black lashes, her firm sweet mouth and cleft chin, was not fifteen before Rudy began to worry, with a jealousy quite unfamiliar to his characteristic conceit, about "fellers."

"You ought to talk to her," he said uneasily to Nelly.

"She has no use for boys," Nelly assured him. "She's got sense."

"They'll go crazy about her," Rudy mused. And Nelly sat down by the kitchen table, and flexed her burning spine, with sharply indrawn breaths, and said thoughtfully:

"She looks just like I used to."

Rudy did not glance at her, nor find the statement surprising. She was just Nelly, plump and shapeless and graying fast, and always ill. She had false front teeth now, but she did not like them, and kept sucking at some sort of candy all day to keep her mouth dry.

Her husband never saw her, really, or heard her, or thought of her. She might have been a wind howling about the Dump, for any personal value she held for him. He was thinking of Hilda.

"You get into trouble with any boy once, and, big as you are, I'll lick the tar out of you!" he said. And Hilda, amusedly, maternally, laughed. She was not afraid. The biggest Curry girl had achieved that mysterious and unenviable distinction, and had been driven out of her home by

her father, with her mother "yelling bloody murder," for the edification of an interested neighbourhood. And one of the Beyermann girls was "bad."

Hilda knew these terms, knew little more. A general sense of sin, of disgrace brought upon innocent elders floated vaguely in her mind when these girls' names arose in conversation. Nelly had once shortly defined it to her as "running with men." Hilda knew quite simply that men had something to do with it, and as she felt personally indifferent to the sex, this trouble seemed a thing quite apart. Even as a sheep feeds on complacently, when its sister sheep has been torn from its side by the attacking wolf, so Hilda fed on, on the fresh pasturage of awakening girlhood, and connected these tragedies with her own life not at all.

"When you catch me getting into trouble you can skin me!" she assured her father.

"You'll get a case on some kid," the man suggested reluctantly.

"You mean he'll get a case on me!" Hilda countered. "I'm going to be a school-teacher," she would reiterate firmly. "I don't want any man coming home drunk to *me*, Saturday nights—I don't want a dozen kids to bring up!"

"Where'd you get the idea men drink Saturday nights?" Rudy, so sensitive was his pride, so childish his belief that she knew nothing derogatory about him, would ask her, half smiling, half hurt. And Hildegard always spared him by answering noncommittally: "Well, some men do!"

She would finish High at sixteen, and then she was going to Normal School; she was going to be a teacher. The rowdy little Sessions girl, the terror of the Dump, had grown taller and filled out a little, and she was a "stylish-looking" child, far ahead of her peers in wisdom and learning, and going to be a school-teacher.

In a bright dream of the future, Hildegard saw herself, a young lady teacher with an admiring class. She would have clean hands and sharp pencils, and everyone would say she was the best teacher in school. She would have black silk dresses with fur or beads on them, and silk stockings, and

patent-leather shoes. And she would have new hats, several new hats; she would be dear Miss Sessions, the popular teacher.

So that nowadays her pride was to learn her lessons; she gloried in her quick brain and keen memory. Her hand was always the first to shoot up at a question from the platform; Hilda Sessions learned things without any trouble at all, took to books naturally. Her teachers lent her Miss Alcott's stories, and Howard Pyle's, and Mrs. Burnett's, and she devoured them, talked intelligently about them, came back for more.

"And if you could see the shanty she comes from!" said Miss Daley to Miss Doyle, commenting upon this star pupil. "You wouldn't believe it! A horrible box-square house high up on slats; down there toward the Dump, a dreadful forlorn mother, a raft of children—the father I don't know anything about; Hilda says he's in real estate—but you simply *marvel*, seeing her, that she could be so—well, so fine."

"She'll get through Institute," Miss Doyle predicted, beating blackboard erasers together in a cloud of astringent dust. And she knew for a moment a sharp pang of something absurdly like envy for this splendid child of the slum near the Dump. Always to be helping one promising student or another toward success—always, one's self, to be just one more teacher among a thousand teachers!

CHAPTER V

I THOUGHT to go in and see 'em, since they sent me a postcard," Rudy argued, "and I thought I'd take Hilda."

Hilda's eyes flashed with blue fires. A trip to the city with her father, a visit to Mabel in the hospital, and maybe dinner down-town, if they were delayed by a call upon Pop's friends. This was living, indeed! She looked anxiously, questioningly at her mother.

It was a warm, exquisite May morning, a Sunday, when spring graciousness had found out even the Dump. Nasturtiums sprawled and flamed in gardens, the delicate tracery of grapevines softened this ugly tin-patched roof and that, and the banksia rose over the Currys' doorway and the Shedds' syringa were in fragrant bloom. The air was warm and soft, yet with a delicious lift in it; the bay was clean blue satin; fog was booming softly away over the western hills.

There had been unexpected rains for three or four days, and the doorways and roads of the neighbourhood provided amply for puddles, puddles that this morning were sky-blue, with puffs of white moving across them. Cocks crowed furiously, bravely into the warmth and light, doves walked busily about the Beyermanns' shed roof, pluming each other, twisting their dragging tails like women in court trains. On the under leaves of the Obliskis' currant bushes, thick cottony leaves that were lapped into a tent, water still shone in heavy drops.

But the rain was over, and Rudy said he had half a mind to go in to town and see Mabel, and maybe look up the Montgomerys. They were theatrical people, Floss and Walt, and he had been very fond of them before his marriage. But they had gone East and drifted out of his life; he never would have thought of them again, if this friendly postcard hadn't come.

Hildegarde studied the postcard interestedly. It repre-

sented a railroad train, stopped at a station, with little ladies in dragging skirts and large hats walking beside it. Underneath the picture were printed the words "S. P. R. R. Station, Ogden, Utah." And on the other side, somebody who signed herself "Floss" had written:

Coming back like the bad penny. We play big time on the coast circuit. Look us up at the Russ House. Having a grand trip.

A woman trying to kill time at a railway stop; perhaps with the last of three-for-a-dime postcards, and the last one-cent stamp to use thriftily. Florence Montgomery had possibly hesitated over the card: "Who'll I send it to, Walt? What was that young feller's name useter come over to Belvedere sometimes on Sundays? Rudy Something—lived at Canfield, over in the San Joaquin. D'y's'pose 'Canfield, Cal.,' would reach him? Sessions! That's the name."

And so she had scribbled the message, and with the deadly directness of a bullet the card had come to the young hand that now held it, to the blue, blue eyes of Hildegard Sessions, past fifteen, ready to graduate from High School, not quite awake yet, but turning, smiling in her sleep—ready to wake.

Hildegard smiled as she served mush into variegated bowls and saucers, as she wiped George's nose and hauled his dead weight to a chair. Theatrical persons! Not—not actual actors and actresses? She had never been to a play, but she had been to Nickelodeons, and she had seen a vaudeville show, with a screamingly funny coloured man in it, singing a song called "Coon, Coon, Coon!"

"You got anything to wear, Hilda?" her father asked.

"Oh, yes!" Of course she had something to wear. There was no house in the neighbourhood so poor or dirty, no girl in the neighbourhood so indifferent to dress, but what a party frock might not be produced at need. In the back of every girl's consciousness, at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, lay the constant knowledge of best clothes, and in answer to every dreamy "if—" in these girls' hearts was the ready answer, "I'd wear my——"

"If he ast me to go out with him—— If I went to that Associated Pipe-fitters' Picnic—— If there's a dance for the church——" ran the girls' dreams. And always there was the warming thought of the shoddy finery that would immediately be requisitioned, the lace to be pressed, the lisle stockings to be washed, the hat that had been recently brightened with a twenty-five-cent cotton rose to be tenderly taken from its box.

Hilda's excited thought now flew to the jammed middle drawer of a walnut bureau in the bare front bedroom upstairs. There was a thick white piqué skirt there; its origin was obscure, it had come years ago in a box from Aunt Alice. Hildegard, with the help of a neighbouring woman who was clever about sewing, had cut it to the daring new length. It had a belt worn into holes from safety-pins, but that didn't matter, Hildegard had a satin ribbon belt, with oxidized clasps.

She dressed excitedly. Black lisle stockings, black Oxfords polished so recently that little blots and pools of polish were still wet upon them, and she had to wash her hands again. A shirtwaist of pink Japanese crêpe, also slightly damp in its heavy seams, for Hilda had just ironed it while it was still wet. This shirtwaist had long sleeves, and for a collar a firm stock of white piqué, folded high, and falling in two great, square-ended tabs upon Hilda's budding breast. A rough shiny black sailor hat, with a bright red band, and lisle gloves limp and slightly yellowed—and she was ready, and beautiful to see.

For under the cheap hat, her glorious hair, in a thick, curly-ended braid now, flung sprays and tendrils of tawny gold, and her cheeks glowed like the sunny side of a peach. The blue eyes blazed darkly, like liquid sapphires, and away from them the dark lashes curled innocently, youthfully, giving her, with the hint of a tip at the end of her white, straight nose, a look of babyish surprise. Against the untouched bloom of her forehead, its daisy-petal white, the line of straight brows was cleanly drawn; the red lips were brimming with smiles this summer morning, and the cleft chin held high.

If anything were lacking in Hilda's holiday attire, she was herself happily unconscious of it. That her beauty was as startlingly rare as her clothes were cheap and commonplace, she did not know. But she sensed kindling fires within her; the world was golden, thrilling, one was a person—one was beginning to feel wings!

She pulled the pink shirtwaist down snugly, fingered the skirt's ragged belt in back to find a safe anchorage for the safety-pins that would hold it in place. She pouted, looking at herself haughtily as she raised the fresh, sweet line of the cleft chin above her stock, and anxiously manipulated it. Tiny beads came out on her forehead, and the gold tendrils caught against them, and were more than ever a beautiful frame for her beautiful face.

The hovels and shanties of the Dump had yielded up other smartly dressed folk this exquisite summer morning. Rudy nodded with superiority to neighbours as he and Hilda walked four blocks in the swimming blue warmth to the trolley. Out of these sour dark bedrooms and muddled bureaus, other girls had extracted finery; everyone looked gay and happy.

Hilda was in ecstasy: it was an open car. Open cars were rare in May! What luck—what luck—what luck! Oh, summer was a heavenly time. And this was only the beginning of her wonderful day. The trolley hummed, bounded upon its way. The long sweet spaces of grass and trees, the cheap disfigurement of the little towns flew by. Everyone was out: baby carriages, small families, picnic parties, soberly strolling folk returning from church.

Everyone wanted outside seats in the trolley, but Hilda didn't have to worry about that. She *had* an outside seat, and was fenced by her father from any crowding or questioning.

"How far is it to the city, Pop?" She had made this trip only once or twice before.

"'Bout twelve miles, maybe. But these fellers don't make much of it!"

She tore her glance from the landscape to give a dutifully admiring glance toward the motorman and the car.

"I wish it was a million miles!" she said.

A man in the seat ahead looked back admiringly at the glowing young face, and Hilda, hooking her crossed arms comfortably over the car's railing, caught the glance, and settled down even more happily than before to golden dreams.

Sunday morning, riding on an open car to the city, with adventures ahead. Dressed to perfection, looking one's best, fifteen last March, and to graduate from High School with honours in a few weeks. Algebra and Latin and mathematics and English composition safely behind one; there would be examinations week after next, but Hilda Sessions was not the student to fear examinations! She gloried in them.

And after the long vacation she would enter Normal School; she would have to take this spin into the city every day, instead of only upon special occasions. Fun—fun—fun. She would be almost a young lady, next fall, going on sixteen.

Afterward, she always remembered this May Sunday as the first day upon which that vague element in the atmosphere that had surrounded her for many unnoticing years had assumed a certain mysterious and thrilling significance. Up to to-day, they had been merely annoying nonentities: boys—the gang—those toughs—those smarties.

To-day, on a crossing in South San Francisco, with the trolley bell gang-gang-ganging madly, she saw two well-dressed youths in straw hats looking at her. Looking at her! Looking so oddly at her. Her peach cheek deepened into an unwilling dimple.

Long after she had passed them she thought of them, and the reluctant smile lingered at the corners of her mouth. What a feeling it gave one—when men stared. Thrilling, amusing, silly—yet a little as if the whole world were a flowery kingdom, and one were a princess walking into it—taking possession of it.

Poor Mabel had hip disease, and had been in the Little Jim Hospital for incurable children for more than two years. It took very little to make Nelly cry about it, and was not often discussed at home. About the time that she was five, Mabel had begun to limp, with a horrible jerking, dragging-up movement at every step, and after months of pain and experiment, this had seemed the only humane solution.

Nelly used to scream and make scenes every time she went to the hospital, and that made Mabel scream, too, "I want to go home with my marmer—I want to go home with my marmer!" Then other little incurables would begin to cry and call out.

And how Hilda, at first, had hated the undergraduate nurses, who so firmly, dispassionately disengaged Mabel's little clinging hot hands from her mother's, with their cool, antiseptic fingers. Neighbours often told Nelly that at those hospitals they thought nothing of cutting you up, any time, for experiments. And this had worried Hilda so agonizingly that she could not understand her mother's placid endurance of the thought, her mournful, resigned, "I wouldn't put it past them one minute!"

But that had been in the first few months of Mabel's absence. Now all the Sessions were reconciled to it. Mabel, from the hot tangled dirty bedding in her mother's parlour, the twisting torment of the child whose tortures cannot be alleviated by all her mother's tears and the neighbours' panicky expedients, had been lifted to a clean, high, flat bed, to only periodical excruciation under the doctor's hands, to times of exhausted—and gradually less exhausted—breathing, resting, between the throes. Mabel was not always in bed now. Sometimes she was up in the sun parlour, with fog-pressed windows about her, and a little crutch beside her kindergarten chair.

There had been an operation, of course. And the doctor told Nelly that they had scooped the poor little bone away like cheese. No telling what had started it; the child might have had a fall, poison had pocketed in the hip.

"We used to whip her because she'd lay on the floor so

much; her father thought she was lazy," Nelly had admitted, in an innocent appeal for the doctor's sympathy. "She'd yell that her side hurt, and many a time I've heard Mr. Sessions say that he'd give her something to cry for!"

And the doctor had duly looked sympathetic. Why not? Which was the more pitiable child, after all, the whipped or the whipper? This physically limping baby could have been made whole by earlier treatment, of course. But then so might the spiritually limping babies who were responsible for her coming into the world.

The Visitors' Entrance was in the old building; they had to walk through a glass-walled bridge to the new one, with its great round rooms radiated with little beds. Flat beds, flat children, languid, pain-wise baby eyes following them. Indifferent little hands fingering dolls, games. Clean, crisp nurses coming and going; one, an eyeglassed, pleasant fat girl, was studying like mad as she sat beside a bed.

"Do you have to study hard?" asked Hilda.

"Oh, Lord!" the girl answered simply.

Hilda thought she would like to be a nurse. She would make nothing of the study part, that was sure. Miss Doyle said she studied through her pores.

The trays were coming in; tepid hospital trays with their plain boiled potatoes and hominy and creamed fresh cod. Half a canned pear in watery syrup, and a cooky. Nice enough, but uninteresting. Why, one sheet of Hilda's hot, block-cut yellow cornbread had more taste in it, one of Mama's heated-up messes of what was left of the corn and the tomatoes and the macaroni all sizzled together in a frying pan with the scrapings of the salty strong butter, was much more satisfying!

Mabel was in bed, getting her tray; she beamed at them. Her big sister's heart yearned toward her in a sudden agony of adoration. The little pale, twisted, gallant thing, in the lumpy, clean hospital nightgown, eating her hominy!

Other children glanced interestedly at the visitors; Rudy produced a game, a brass hook by which Mabel was to scale Pike's Peak, on a board mazed with brass nails.

"It kin be done, it's lotser fun, you'll say so when you once begun!" Mabel read the slogan painfully, but eagerly. "I kin read real good now, Hilda!" she stated triumphantly.

"I should say you can!"

"I read a book called 'Dotty Dimple's Cousin Prudy,'" said Mabel.

"You never did! By yourself?"

"She spelled three words for me, didn't you, Miss Morgan?"

"That's all," smiled the nurse.

"Pop, do you hear that?"

"I guess she's going to be smart, like my oldest daughter here—graduates from High next June," said Rudy.

"For pity's sakes!" said the nurse. "You ought to come in here and be a nurse," she suggested to Hildegarde.

"I'm going to Normal. I'm going to be a teacher."

"Oh, for pity's sakes, is that right? When you're coming in to town so much," the nurse said, in a generous burst, "you come in and see your sister here whenever you want to—I'll sneak you in!"

"Oh, thanks!" Hildegarde said. They were all silent for a space—Mabel, too young to be embarrassed, eating her potato, and looking fondly at her puzzle, Rudy alert, but apparently with nothing particular to say, the nurse straightening a coverlet, and Hilda looking about. Shaded windows, bars of sunshine, clean oiled floors, high iron beds. The little boy with the weight on his foot was gone. There was a new, bright little coloured girl in his bed.

Going out, Rudy asked the nurse if Mabel wasn't much better. Miss Morgan, recalling her last instructions regarding interrogative parents, said, "She's doing nicely."

"But look at her—how good she looks. She's better, ain't she?"

"I reely don't know," the nurse said civilly. "You could telephone the doctor and ask him."

"But she seems so bright," Hilda said wistfully. Miss Morgan could speak here, and she did.

"She's a little darling," she said.

"How long do you s'pose they'll keep her?" Rudy persisted.

"I reely couldn't say. But you could ask the doctor."

Hilda and Rudy walked out into soft sunshine; it was almost one o'clock. They got dummy seats on a Sacramento Street cable car, and jerked and rattled gloriously through the empty Sunday streets. They passed the park, and Van Ness Avenue lined with magnificent homes and big gardens, and the Polk Street cable car, wobbling on its way, and so up Hyde Street hill, and down through the crowded, brilliant, jumbled streets of Chinatown, all lanterns and strange little greasy markets, and frail upper balconies with thin black rails.

They lunched at a counter in Kearney Street, on fried oysters and pie. The bivalves were small, forty to a service, smoking hot, and greasy; there was an immense thick white bowl of crackers to be eaten with them, and hairy, sweet shrimps were served without charge beforehand, to amuse the patrons while they watched their oysters frying in black grease two feet behind the counter. Rudy poured catsup all over his, a sea of rich red, and had coffee, a cigar, and a toothpick to embellish his lunch. He asked the proprietor, a whiskered man in dirty gartered shirt-sleeves, if Joe Marvin ever came in nowadays, and the man, wiping the counter with a cross-barred rag, said respectfully:

"Oh, yes, sir. Mr. Marvin is usually in for lunch. But we don't generally see him Sundays."

"Naturally not. Lives in Oakland," Rudy said, with a man-of-the-world-air, picking his teeth, pocketing his change. Hilda was impressed.

"Now and then," the proprietor said, encouraged, "something'll bring him to town Sundays, and then he'll drop in. But we don't often see him on Sundays."

"I s'pose not," Rudy conceded, departing. Hilda smiled a good-bye. A pleasant man, and a pleasant Sunday street, with sections of the Sunday papers already beginning to blow about upon it. The day was warm, blue; tar on the crossings was even softened a little beneath one's dancing feet. Boat

whistles sounded mellow and sweet from the near-by bay.

At the hotel they met their first check, and Hilda's heart chilled. The Montgomerys were not there any more. Sure, they had been there. But they were gone.

Nothing for it but to go home, so early—so unsatisfied! Hilda thought, in bitter disappointment. But she had not reckoned upon this strangely adequate and urban father. Rudy, far from being dismissed, lingered at the desk.

"Where'd they go?"

Well, of course! They must have gone somewhere! Hilda breathed again, expectantly, confidently, glued her eager eyes upon the clerk as he shuffled the contents of a pigeonhole, and spoke to a companion named Bill.

"Bill—member where Mr. Montgomery went?"

"Walt?" asked Bill.

"I guess so. Sure."

"Cross the bay somewhere," said Bill. "They says they was going to take time out until everything come to life in the fall."

"Belvedere? They used to have a houseboat there," Rudy prompted.

"That's right," said both clerks together. And delicately chewing gum, Bill suddenly extended his hand. "Hello, Sessions," he said in surprise. Hilda, in a glow of excitement, was introduced. He knew Pop! Life was proving fascinating beyond her dreams.

While the men exchanged reminiscences of a casual friendship almost twenty years forgotten, her eyes danced over the commercial hotel's grimy office; big dirty windows on the street, and old men in light oak and wicker rockers lounging at them. Spittoons. Round-backed tavern armchairs reinforced by twisted wires. Arc lights spitting high overhead toward the back, where dark stairs wound upward, and where the elevator lived in a narrow cage with twisted iron doors. The smell of washed floors, and stale cigars, and whisky. The world . . . !

"All right! We'll go to Belvedere," said Rudy, emerging into the languid streets again.

"Oh, Pop!" There was no limit to his daring. She could hardly keep her feet on the ground as she walked beside him.

"I used to know a lot of those fellers," Rudy said, secretly pleased, as she was, with their adventures.

"Pop, do you mean cross the bay?" Hilda trembled.

"Sure!" He was magnificently casual. Tickets. They were in a thinned crowd; at half-past two o'clock the holiday flood stood at the full for a few hours before it began to ebb back to the city again. They went through the gate, down the piers, they were on the boat.

Where to sit? But Hilda wanted to sit everywhere at once in the delicious novelty of being free of this floating, enormous, clean fairyland. Inside? Outside? On the shore side? On the Gate side?

The whistle blew, the ferry boat grated on the piles, pushed free, careened slightly on the blue water. Up and down—up and down went the white ropes that formed the rail; ropes thick with paint, framing little diamonds of satin blue water. The sun shone, gulls circled about crying harshly. The bright city slid by, steep house-covered hills rising everywhere, cable cars crawling up and down; Rudy showed her the military reservation, identified the black flashes that passed them as dolphins.

"How long since you've crossed the bay, Hilda?"

"Just after we left the ranch, I guess, when Aunt Tina Brewer was married—I was about seven, maybe."

"I wonder what's happened to that family," Rudy mused. "A bunch of girls there were. They all married—Vick, she was the nice one. Lives up-state somewhere, Red Bluff or Petaluma. I think the boy died. Maybe your mother's kept track of them."

"Well, Aunt Alice, who lives in the Mission, and has the little boy named Lester whose clothes fit Georgie, is she one of them?" Hildegard puzzled.

"Oh, no, she's your mother's sister, she married a skunk named Babcock—she's your aunt," Rudy elucidated. "I think she'd come down and see your mother, and all that,

but she married a lemon! Your mother can't waste time on a frost like Frank Babcock, so we kinder dropped them."

Hilda wasted a pitying thought upon this Aunt Alice; it would be terrible to *want* to come see Mama and Pop, and be dropped!

"Well, then, Uncle George, who lives in Detroit with Grandpa, and is making so much money, is he Mama's full brother?"

"Nope. Half-brother." Rudy fell to musing, and Hilda could work out the complicated family relationship to suit herself. Relations ought to have an important part in one's scheme; cousins and aunts and grandfather were delightful to think about. But it was only in confusing snatches that she could extract news of her own from her parents. She wondered if Uncle George would ever ask her to come East, and spend a winter in Detroit. Thrilling!

"How do you do?" she said confusedly, through golden dreams, smiling, flushing, bowing as they walked off the boat. A dark young man, big and pleasant-faced, had snatched off his cap to bow to her. "How do you do?"

He came out to them; her wits cleared.

"Mr. Penfield—my father—How do you do! Mr. Penfield—make you acquainted——"

She hated—she loathed introductions. They were a very baptism of fire into the world of fine manners, fine voices, fine ideals of which High School was giving her her first nervous, half-hostile glimpses. "Don't you *hate* introducing people?" girls said to her at recess, with little introspective giggles and shudders, and Hilda—learning what introductions were—knew now that she hated them, too.

But Sidney Penfield was not embarrassed or confused. A delightful boy—young man, rather, he must be eighteen. Sunburned, freckled, boyish, friendly, there was the consciousness of his own social security even in his youthful awkwardness, and Hilda vaguely recognized it, and admired it, even in the present confusion of her thoughts.

She had met him more than once, after school, when she sometimes stayed to help Miss Doyle to mark papers.

He was one of the Burlingame crowd; his father, A. J. Penfield, was a railroad magnate, and one of the richest men in the state.

Miss Doyle was coaching Sidney Penfield in Latin, for some college examination, and while Hildegard marked algebra and history papers with red "A's" and "B's" she had sometimes heard him struggling through his verbs, and often had looked with a girl's superior amusement at the big, sprawling, uncomfortable young creature, who broke pencils and tousled his hair so desperately.

But to-day he looked impressive in his knickerbockers and cap, he was carrying golf clubs, and that fact was impressive, too. He was going to visit an aunt, in San Rafael, it appeared, and would stay several days.

Grinning eagerly at Hildegard, obviously pleased at the encounter, he put a hand under her elbow and steered her through the crowd, and presently the three stood a little apart from it, in the holiday confusion and heat and noise, and could speak to each other.

"You're 'A. J.'s son?" Rudy asked, with his air of easy informedness. "Looks like the big railroads are going to get together at last, don't it?" he added. "Time they did, too!"

Hildegard saw the subtle change in Sidney Penfield's look, the faint contracting of lips and brows, the hint of puzzlement in the eyes. Her father had gone too far! He had said something wrong.

Her own soul shrank and suffered like some wet cold sea thing in desert sands. Sidney flushed boyishly, and laughed a little uncomfortably. His tone was suddenly distant, almost haughty.

"I haven't the least idea, I'm sure. They—they don't consult me, you know!"

Pop was snubbed, put in his place. He shouldn't have—he shouldn't have introduced this note with such a boy. Hildegard's face burned with shame.

"I'll see you soon. Good-bye!" Sidney was saying, with his old boyish manner. His cap was lifted again, he grinned;

he was gone in the crowd that was streaming toward the San Rafael train.

"That's Penfield's boy, is it?" Rudy then asked, as he and Hildegard walked slowly along the water front. "He knows all about the railroad deal, you can bet," he added. "I could make a good little sum out of it, if I got on to it before the papers did! They've told him to keep his mouth shut maybe."

Hildegard said nothing aloud. Deep within her there rose the uncomfortable suspicion that Pop's attitude was somehow to blame. But Sidney Penfield didn't matter, anyway. She concentrated her attention upon the novelty of her immediate surroundings and forgot him at once.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE smoking four o'clock heat they were walking past little houseboats that fringed the shore; the languid, receding water was lapping the flower-boxed rear decks. The tide was ebbing, the muddy flats were odorous of salt fish and vegetable decay; near by, a score of small boats were at anchor.

Ahead of them the wooded side of the little island rose in all its summer beauty; low, shingled brown houses were buried among the oak trees in gardens filled with eucalyptus and acacia and climbing roses. Geraniums and nasturtiums spread their blazing scarlet everywhere; here and there a striped awning added, to Hildegarde's enchanted eyes, a touch of incredible picturesqueness.

On their right were little shops and shore restaurants odorous to-day of beer and cigars and fried fish; late lunchers looked out at them as they went by. On the left were more houseboats, anchored in shining hot mud, swarming with flies, tenanted by idling Sunday visitors. Each square-porched little craft bore a name, fancifully composed of twigs or ship's rope, or lettered in staggering attempts at free-hand art. *El Nido, Billdot, Heartsease, Bide-a-wee.*

The Montgomerys were in almost the last of the straggling row, and so pleasantly near to the aristocratic commencements of the town proper. Their houseboat had, as young Norman Montgomery later pointed out to Hilda, its "hind feet" firmly upon the white, rocky earth of the main street, but its "fore feet" were at sea, and because of the little gang-plank that extended some ten feet from the shore, it was actually on the water, especially when the tide was in. It was bigger than the others, and quite charming, once one had

come under the curved sign, *Florence*, and left the burning road behind.

A dark narrow hallway encumbered by a hat-rack, and a small sitting room dowdily furnished with stuffed chairs and a table had to be threaded before they stepped out upon the big deck, or was it really the front porch?—although farthest from land. Here was a centre table, comfortable, mismated wicker chairs, a white sailcloth awning only partly hiding the blue afternoon sky overhead, a wide couch covered with striped ticking, books, magazines, an almost emptied candy box and a yellow kitchen bowl filled with enormous black cherries.

It was a big space, edged with a delightfully shiplike railing of the same heavily painted rope Hilda had noticed on the *Tiburon*, only with plain loops between the posts, and narrow flower boxes above. These were running over with lobelia, nasturtiums, sweet peas, and pink-pointed daisies; in one place morning glories had been trained on strings, great heart-shaped leaves and fairy bells of bloom, with the westerling sun shining straight through them.

Toward the southwest the island rose, beginning to show great blots of soft shade now as the day lowered its banners; awnings, oaks, brown roofs making a tapestry of rich colour above the water. On the east rolled the hills of the Oakland shore, already brown; the windows of the quarantine station caught the sunlight, and seemed to set the old brick army post on fire.

And east, south, and west breathed the blue, blue waters of the bay. It was dotted with small craft; from Belvedere's southernmost point a pier and boathouses extended, where people were bathing, with screaming and shouts of laughter. Everywhere were the dip and shine and murmur of summer waters; a fugitive breeze lifted the white sail of a yacht, and Hilda could hear the men's voices as the boom went over; a surrey with a tan canopy climbed the hill—in the trees, out of the trees, up and up the zigzag road.

She did not absorb these details all at once, she was only conscious from the instant of arrival at the *Florence* that this

was paradise, and the various items that composed it only became gradually clear to her as the moments went by, and the sun shone on the sailcloth roof above her head, and the water lapped and whispered underneath her.

Walt Montgomery, a man older than Pop, with satin-slick black hair in scallops above a pale, thin face, had been lounging on the couch when they arrived and had had a moment of discomfort at the prospect of unexpected visitors. But that was over now; he had not even changed his baggy trousers and old coat; he was back on the couch, interestedly talking to Pop.

Mrs. Montgomery, called by her husband Floss, was an enormous billowing woman with a kind, eager, unctuous voice that made Hilda appreciate at once that she, Hilda Sessions, could make this lady like her. Floss had a rather dramatic manner, an oddly clear and unnatural pronunciation, her hair was dyed an extraordinary reddish-yellow, and she let it be known almost instantly that all the actors and actresses worth knowing were her intimate friends, but the words that immediately came to Hilda's mind regarding her were "good-hearted, good-natured, generous, nice."

"All is we had a regular bust here last Friday night, dolling," she said to Hilda, snatching up sheets of Sunday newspaper as she spoke. "Mist' Montgomery had a little birthday party, and a few of the boys and girls stayed for poker all day yesterday. Last night, tired as I was—I've got a bunion that is a regular heart-scald to me," Floss added in a confidential aside to Hilda—"but tired as I was, Norman and I straightened the whole place before I went to bed! No, don't you do it, dear," she interrupted herself quickly, as Hilda, full of sympathy, made a gesture as if she would help, "that's all there is to do—I've just been resting to-day. Mist' Montgomery and my nephew didn't get up until noon, and then I give 'em a good filling breakfast and called it lunch!"

A kind, fat woman, with an ebullient air of friendship and hospitality. Hildegard had never seen any one quite like her, so instantly affectionate and easy. She had a full, some-

what faded face under the crimped, dyed hair, protruding, loving brown eyes, a soft pouch of double chin, and an ugly, loose, yet oddly fascinating mouth. She wore bulging old shoes, unbuttoned and slit to show the white stocking underneath, a white skirt, and a Japanese kimono, evidently over a nightgown. The kimono was fastened by a pin with a green glass stone in it, but there were real diamonds and handsome ones in Floss's ears and upon her puffy, soft fingers.

Walt had been treated like a "dawg" by a vaudeville booking office it appeared, and both he and Floss were glad to renew their old friendship with Rudy and tell a new listener about it. Walt did an act all by himself, simply described by his wife to Hildegard as the greatest money-maker of all time. Hilda could only infer that the managers were losing their minds. Couldn't they deduce anything from the plain facts that Walt's act had packed houses in Detroit, even while the Grau Grand Opera Company was there, and that it had been held over for three weeks in Buffalo?

"Why, but they are so silly," Hilda burst out earnestly, in her delicious little-girl voice of indignation; "they just *lose* money by—by not having Mr. Montgomery!"

They had not been paying much attention to her, this nice little girl with her hair down her back, but now the actor looked at her in sharp, sudden approval and said, "The kid sees it, Sessions. That's the whole situation!" and Floss Montgomery said, in the rich deep notes that were almost like a song: "Well, God bless her dear little heart if she isn't right!"

Hilda's soul swelled with joy. Later, when she went into a small bedroom with Mrs. Montgomery while the latter dressed in a figured sateen costume with flabby big sleeves and forced her fat feet into satin slippers, a real friendship sprang into being, full-blown, between them. Floss showed her the picture of the little boy who had died, a fat boy in a Fauntleroy suit, and a picture of her mother, also plump and double-chinned, in striped silk flounces, leaning elegantly

upon a marble pillar, with a bare arm exposed, and a cascade of ringlets flowing over her shoulder.

There were pictures of Floss here, too, one quite startling in tights and a fringed sash, with a small sailor hat tipped like a saucer on top of her rich curls and the dim outline of a big sail behind her. And there was a martial one, with a shirt of what looked like mail on; small white print scratched on the plate stated that this was "Florence Cooper as the Queen of the Amazons."

"Were you on the stage, too, Mrs. Montgomery?"

"Oh, dolling, didn't you ever hear of me?—but you ain't but fifteen, and I've been off for six years. I'm only chief cook and bottle-washer now, but I was on for twenty years, Cooper and Montgomery, Floss and Walt. We had a lovely little sketch. I help Walt with 'The Old Actor's Dream.' I don't act now. He changes costume nine times in eleven minutes—what do you think of that?"

Hilda could not have said what she thought of it, or of anything. She was in a dream, a dream of summer sunset, wooded island, blue bay—a dream whose immediate setting was this whitewashed, flower-framed deck over on the water.

The tide was coming back now, softly swelling under them, covering the mud, conspiring with the soft close of day to turn the whole world to beauty. Hilda curled herself up on the little seat that ran all about the railing, hooked her elbow over it, leaned her head against an awning prop, and stared at the water as if her eyes could never have their fill of this new miracle.

It was after six o'clock, but Floss had asked them to stay to a "pick-up" supper. Hilda had asked if she might help prepare it, but Floss had said heartily that there was nothing to do but put some ham and bread and beer on the table. So Hilda was free to stare out across the inlet and to dream.

Visiting yachts had opened their white wings and were drifting out of the bay, and the *Tiburon*, making her late afternoon trip, was packed with returning picnickers. There was a good deal of life stirring along the straggling line of the houseboats, the *Bide-a-wee* and *Billdot*, and *Heartsease*,

guests departing, and wearied children fretful and protestant. The silky water was crossed with many small busy wakes; the west was opal, deep bands of softest pink and blue crossed by puffs of slowly moving darker clouds.

The colour in the sky seemed to be stationary, but the sea darkened steadily, grew more solid, grew leaden. Presently the light was so low that the little waves were tipped with it, and showed a moment's fire before the twilight came. And almost immediately a pale glimmer struck the water and picked out the furry tops of the island trees with silver-gray.

Someone sat down beside her. Pop? Mr. Montgomery?

No, it was a young man—the Montgomerys' nephew, of course. They had referred to him constantly, and Hilda had seen his picture in the stuffy bedroom. He was grown up, he was twenty. Norman Montgomery.

"I have to introduce myself, Miss Sessions," he said. "Aunt Floss sent me out here."

She twisted about, hooked her right elbow over the rail now, faced the moon. The world was still flooded with light, twilight, moonlight, they could see each other clearly. Beneath them the white-washed deck of the *Florence* lifted gently in the incoming tide. The air was soft, salty, and the shore breezes brought down the smell of tarweed and dew-wet dust from the hills.

Hilda's dark gold hair was about her flushed face like an aureole against the sunset sky. Her blue eyes shone liquidly, pools of light. She was a little frightened to find herself talking to a strange young man, and her lips parted on a half smile, and her breath came in childish gasps.

They were alone on the porch—alone in the world, for all she knew. Norman Montgomery looked at her, smiled slowly, looked away only to bring that appraising, that easy glance back again.

His words meant nothing. Nothing. They were of the houseboat, and her school, and his own work. He was playing in stock, at the Alcazar Theatre, in San Francisco, but he was going on the road soon. She hadn't seen "The Sword of the King"? He had had a nice little part in that. She

hadn't seen "The Lion and the Mouse"? This week he had a rotten part; she mustn't come this week. It was a rotten show, anyway.

Oh, magic—magic—magic of a summer moon and a summer sea, of his words, ready, easy, gentle with her shyness, of his glances. Her own glances took fire, her own words, the simplest, the briefest of them, seemed fraught with significance. The satin water swelled and rippled against the *Florence*, the nasturtiums raised their saucy faces to the moon, a night breeze lifted the painted sailcloth overhead, there was an odour of honeysuckle in the warm night air.

Hilda's own soul blossomed like some moonflower that has been starving for its hour. Her elbow on the rail, her thick braid upon her shoulder, her lashes were lowered, lifted, lowered again. She seemed afloat upon some perilous enchanted sea. The rail—the nasturtiums—the moonshine on the water—and this young man, reverently, eagerly leading her into talk, listening to what she said.

"So you like Dickens?"

"I loved 'Bleak House.'"

"You ought to have seen my uncle and aunt do 'Nancy and Bill Sikes.'"

"Oh, I would of loved to!"

His aunt came to the door with a lamp that spread a mild yellow glow through the deepening dusk. Hilda sat next to her father at supper, hardly speaking, as she ate her bread and ham and cheese. She hardly spoke on the boat trip back to the city; Norman Montgomery had to accompany them, it appeared; he had an early rehearsal next morning.

On the trolley trip back to San Bruno, and to the square, harsh wooden house, standing crooked to the street, and with a background of Dump, Rudy thought she was tired, she was so still.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE night of the third of July, a Saturday, there was a full moon. Every yacht and houseboat and spare bedroom in Belvedere was filled; there was to be a water carnival. Hildegard Sessions was visiting the Montgomerys.

She had come up to town in the afternoon, meeting Mrs. Montgomery at Swain's Bakery in Post Street for a supper of chocolate and English muffins, and going with her afterward to see Walt in "The Old Actor's Dream" at the Orpheum. Walt was playing a casual week, it appeared, and Norman was helping his uncle, so that Floss was free.

Floss was comfortable, affectionate, confidential with Hildegard, and Hildegard was breathless with amazement and excitement and deep, irrational, fifteen-year-old happiness, and agreed feverishly and sympathetically with everything the older woman said, so that they got on splendidly together.

The lighted streets, the restaurants, the chipping of feet, the strangeness and thrill of everything intoxicated her like wine. Delicacy stores, dreary little commercial hotels, packed trolley cars, lights shining everywhere, voices. Lotta's Fountain was banked in flowers—summer flowers, old-maid's pincushions and marigolds and wallflowers not too humble to add their purple and gold and bronze to the white of the Shasta daisies and the sweet curled baby roses. And the fruit stalls were slanting walls of orange and red and yellow.

"The Old Actor's Dream" was breath-taking; better than the acrobats and the bell-ringers, better even than the other playlet "The Rowan Flower." How could Walter Montgomery—how could *any* man play all those parts so fast, with just one black screen for dressing room? Darkness, and then

a pool of white spotlight, and in it Hamlet, or Jim the Penman, or the Hunchback, or Sir Peter Teazle, and then blackness again. And afterward, just Mr. Montgomery snatching off the red hat of Cardinal Wolsey, and bowing, flushed and breathless, to the applauding house.

He and Norman joined them for oysters afterward, and they all went home together to Belvedere, which was in gala mood and decorated with strings of Japanese lanterns for to-morrow. Hilda, who had been chattering eagerly to Mrs. Montgomery, was silent again. She leaned back against the white-painted deckhouse of the steamer, her eyes widening, gleaming like purple stars in the faint light from the cabin windows. Her thick braid had vanished; an awkward soft crown of dark gold was about her serious young brows. Hilda had put up her hair.

It was midnight when they took the short walk from the ferry to the houseboat, and broad moonlight. Floss yawned frankly, sharply, as they went, but Walt, still wrapped in the glory of his late triumph at the theatre, strode along in dark majesty, scowling, biting his lip. After Sir Peter, and Jim, and the Hunchback, and the Prince of Denmark, it was always hard for him to descend to common everyday life. He had been as silent as Hilda over the oyster supper, merely smiling soberly, magnificently at her, with eyes still ringed with greasy shadows, when she had exclaimed, in an awe-struck voice: "It was the most wonderful thing I ever saw in my life!"

Norman walked silently, too, but Hilda was conscious of that tall, lazily moving form, as if he had been an army with banners. Whenever her glance was for an instant lifted and turned toward him, she met his dark eyes, fixed upon her.

"You're sleeping in with me, dearie, and I've put Walt out on the deck porch," said Floss, leading the way into the salt-scented little bedroom with its scrolled and high-backed walnut bed. Hilda put her little telescope basket down on a fringed plush chair, took off her hat, laid her gloves on the bureau. She blinked sleepily; caught a glimpse of herself in a little mirror with the unwonted dignity of upturned hair.

She was breathing slowly, deeply, she knew not why. Her heart went thump—thump—thump.

"Now you give Walt fifteen minutes in here to get into his wrapper," said Floss, "and I'll call you!"

Hilda went into the crowded little pitch dark sitting room, went through the tiny kitchen, where a yellow lamp burned, went on, on to the wide porch whose painted sailcloth awning was drowned in moonlight. Moonlight lying white on the nasturtiums, dew in great pearls on their dry, flat leaves. Moonlight on the lipping water; the tide was almost at the full. Moonlight on the rounded soft tops of Belvedere's oaks, and the brown low roofs of the houses from whose windows, here and there, reddish-gold beams came out to mingle with the moonshine.

A smell of sedge, and tarweed, and dry summer fields, and salt water. And a banjo playing on some yacht, not far away, the thrum-thrum-thrum sometimes joined by laughing young voices for a few bars, sometimes unaccompanied. Thrum—thrum—thrum—like the beating heart of the wonderful dark velvety world.

Norman Montgomery was there; his room was a small room, opening as the kitchen and sitting room did, straight on the big porch where all the actual living of the family was done. He was sitting on the couch where his uncle would presently sleep. He stood up when Hilda came out, and took her hand.

And at the touch of his fingers her heart seemed to begin to thump—thump—thump with the banjo, and swim in a blind glory of silver whiteness, like the moonlight. She smiled at him.

There was a place where the awning, drawn low and taut by ropes, stopped at just the height that made it easy for Hildegard, when she and Norman had ducked under it, to stand outside, and rest her elbows upon it, and stare upward at the stars.

"And now the world is *all* sky!" she said softly, in a little-girl tone of triumph.

Norman was beside her, turned sideways so that he could watch her, and so tall that he looked down upon the soft crown of recently dignified hair.

"All sky!" he conceded. But he did not look at the sky. He looked at the flower-like face close to his own, seriously uplifted to the velvet, dark-blue dome overhead and the throb-throb-throbbing of the stars. Creamy skin, with a bloom upon it even in the moonlight, wide-open eyes as grave as a baby's great blue eyes, parted scarlet lips above the proud lift of the firm, cleft chin, soft hair, unaccustomed to its new position, fallen back in a cloud of dull gold.

"I love the sky," said Hilda, in a husky breath that was only the ghost of her own rich voice. "Sometimes—when the Eyetalians are quarrelling all over the place," she went on, "and kids are yelling, and all the women talking over their dishpans, or maybe yelling at the men—it's funny to look up at it—so high and so quiet, and think that maybe there are folks up there—looking down at us. . . ."

"Hilda——" the boy said, with a boy's awkward half laugh. His arm went about her; she was not yet sixteen, she felt his breath warm and quick where the loose silky waves of gold were ruffled about her ears.

She could not speak. But she dropped her temple a little, and it rested against his own, and their two young faces were together.

Only for a moment. Then they heard Floss coming out, and caught the edge of the awning with their finger-tips, and ducked, and were back on the porch again, where the white moonlight was filtering through in bright slits on the window boxes. Floss dumped an armful of blankets and sheets on the couch, and they had to jerk the blankets away from under them, and tumble the sodden satin and velours pillows to the floor.

Hilda helped her make the bed; she did not dare glance toward Norman again. The water was rippling—rippling, and the moonlight drenching everything with mysterious silver. But the houseboat party with the banjo had fallen

quiet now, and lights everywhere had flickered into darkness.

Floss, the bed made, linked an arm about her tall nephew's neck, and laid the other about Hilda's waist, and they stood talking in that little luxury of idle words that sometimes comes as a finish to a full day.

"Norman, you ought to make a sponge cake to-morrow, if those folks are coming to lunch."

Then Hilda's incredulous laugh lifted to his face. "You can't make sponge cake?"

"Can't? I used to make sponge cake when I wasn't but ten!"

"He's old-fashioned—you'd die at him! His mama was Walt's brother's wife, and I loved her like a sister," said Floss, richly, unctuously, looking into the face so close to her own in the gloom, and kissing him luxuriously. "What do you think of a feller who was on the stage when he wasn't but four years old, Hilda? Played in 'Peg Woffington.'"

"Oh, Gawd, I must of been good at that!" said Norman in splendid scorn.

"Never you mind now, you was all right!" Floss assured him lovingly.

"Here's the one that ought to be on the stage," Norman remarked, with a jerk of his shoulder toward Hilda. "Dora, in 'Diplomacy.' Wouldn't she be a wonder?"

"That's right—she'd be a regular doll-baby," Floss admitted, looking at her thoughtfully. "You never thought about it, did you, dear?" she asked Hilda. "Why don't you just ask Popper sometime would he leave you try it? We could get you a nice little part."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Hilda was all blushes, laughter, shyness, ecstasy.

"I'd give you a bit of coaching, to start you off," Norman offered. And at the business-like voice and the quietly appraising glance, her heart swelled again, until she felt as if a balloon were inside her, crushing out her breath, and suffocating her with joy. He knew what he was talking about, too, he *was* an actor, he already was made free of that wonderful world of make-believe!

"A little girl named Pidgy Warner and her mother's coming over to-morrow," Floss stated, yawning. "She was 'Baby Warner'—you've heard of her. And she'd like—" Floss went on, again tilting her brightly dyed, tousled head to look fondly at her nephew—"she'd like to take my boy away from me—I know that perfectly well, if I don't know anything else!"

"Yes, she would," drawled Norman, in youthful scorn.

Hildegarde's heart thumped painfully. There were usurpers, rivals in this new kingdom. The first pangs of jealousy rose, dry and painful, within her. Pidgy. Hateful flirt!

"Hope you keep your good health, Aunt Floss, until I fall in love with Pidgy Warner!" Norman added. "I'll make her sponge cake, and I'll take her walking up the hill, but we'll shove her on to the six o'clock boat and call it a day, won't we, Hildegarde?"

"I think you ought to be polite to her!" Hildegarde protested, half laughing, half shocked, all ecstasy again.

"Don't you get sweet on *this* little girl, now—she isn't nothing but a kid!" Floss said amusedly, in alarm.

"All right, that's a bargain, Hilda. You and me aren't going to get sweet on each other."

"All right," said Hilda's exquisite voice, with laughter under its demure and dutiful tone.

"Well, come on, kiss me, and let's get some sleep," Floss said with a great yawn, laying her head on Norman's shoulder. "I'll send Walt out. . . ."

She stumbled into the dark, hot house, Hilda after her. Norman went, with a rending, audible yawn, to his own little room. But before his door closed, Hilda and his aunt were back on the porch again. Poor Walt, despairing of his porch bed, had crawled into his own and was deeply asleep. That put Hilda, to her childish delight, on the porch. Did she mind?

Mind? Oh, she'd adore it. Norman arranged a hanging curtain so that the rising sun should not smite her eyes, and she went in to the microscopic bathroom to undress.

When she came out there was a candle burning by her

opened porch bed, and she could hear Norman's low, laughing voice and his aunt's in his lighted bedroom.

She sank off to delicious sleep to that sound, and the lipping of the water, and the splash of an oar, as a late rowboat made its way out to some houseboat in a ripple of warm moonlight.

CHAPTER VIII

ECSTASY to sleep in this strange beauty and peace, and ecstasy to awaken just as the dawn was tipping the sea with red-gold; to sleep again, dream heavenly dreams all laughter and soft summer perfumes, and wake again.

"Time to get up, nearly ten!" Norman said joyfully, putting a tousled head out of his door. "We've got to make a sponge cake, Hilda!"

Mrs. Montgomery was on the porch, it was broad day; Fourth of July. The world was blanketed in creamy fog. Crackers were popping along the water front, the warm still air of the summer morning was faintly scented with gunpowder. Flags, bunting, Japanese lanterns, girls in flaring white skirts and sailor hats, coming and going in rowboats and canoes.

Hilda, curled in her light blankets, smiled sleepily at life. Her blue eyes were dewy, her cheeks poppy-colour from deep sleep, her loosened soft glory of tawny hair hung in a mass on her shoulders and sprayed in soft films about her face.

"Get dressed, Norman, and I'll lend Hilda a wrapper," Mrs. Montgomery said. "Walt went into town hours ago. You kids can have your coffee out here, and then we can clear up. I've got a ham, and I'm going to have a big potato salad, and if they don't like it they know what they can do!" Floss added, comfortably, to Hilda, when Norman had disappeared, and the two women were whisking the couch into shape. "We'll heat a lot of rolls, and have some strawberries with the sponge cake."

A morning of cloudless delight—a morning spent in Paradise. Hilda's best embroidered petticoat had been laundered by herself for this occasion, days ago. She wore her

graduation dress of dotted white Swiss. An old Chinese came to the houseboat gangplank, his heavy baskets balanced across his shoulders upon a thick pole of sweat-oiled bamboo, and they bargained with him for tomatoes and strawberries. They made the parlour and kitchen neat, Hilda dreamily wondering why work in her own mother's kitchen and parlour was never such fun.

And while they wiped coffee-cups Norman beat up his sponge cake, the white of the eggs must froth until he could safely invert the bowl without dislodging them, the oven he tested with a big hand, grinning meanwhile over his shoulder at Hilda. Black hair, white skin, wicked and adorable and boyishly engaging smile, how familiar she was already becoming with that face!

It had bent above hers in the moonlight last night; he had almost—he had not quite!—kissed her. To-night would he kiss her? The thought started a strange, delicious inner trembling. Would there be more moonlight to-night, and would they duck the sailcloth awning, and stand outside it, leaning on it, and staring up at the vault of the summer sky?

An undercurrent to all the day's strange dreamy happiness ran that quivering hope and fear. She looked at him secretly, furtively—how wonderful were his gaiety, his brotherly airs, his business-like instructions regarding such help as she might give him with the cake. His "No, Hilda, that big pan—nope, the egg-beater again!"

Had he forgotten last night, or was he remembering, too? Was he thinking of to-night, or were men above such weaknesses? She was too young, too shy, too unversed in the ways of girlhood to attempt to test him. She only obeyed him, and the indication of his mood, sometimes raising her flaming dark blue eyes in an almost timid smile, always watching him, always conscious of him.

The Warners arrived at one o'clock, when an augmented table had been set on the porch, and embellished with flowers, casually scattered knives and forks, olives, crackers, candy, sliced tomatoes red against a thick white platter, paper napkins, paper plates.

Pidgy Warner, twenty, dark-haired, dancing-eyed, rosy, smartly dressed, confident, a born flirt. Her mother, a laced, ribboned, ruffled, ruched, fringed, veiled, and scalloped stout woman, faded and tearful, living only for her Pidgy. And a young man, Mr. Courtney Eaton, effeminate, lisping, garrulous, tow-headed and white-eyelashed, and, in spite of everything, somehow amusing and likeable.

"Mobth on the boat!" exhaustedly exclaimed Mr. Eaton. "Oh, heaventh!' I thed, to a perfect bruither of a big, bounthing girl bethide me, 'Kill theeth ladieth if you will, but thpare my life!'"

They all laughed youthfully, circling about in a general distribution of summer wraps and candy boxes and bags, and it then appeared that Miss Warner quite frankly and openly desired a few words aside with Norman Montgomery.

"Norman," said Pidgy with a killing smile and a complacent adjustment of the rings and bracelets on her round little arms, "I've got to speak to you!"

"We're quite alone, Lady Gwen," Norman answered, falling into a dramatic attitude at the table, his hand plunged into his thick hair, his body spread at a long angle, his fine eyes fixed darkly on space.

"No, seriously," Pidgy said, a little annoyed by the general laughter, and with a flash of brown eyes. "It's something you said to May Henderson—well, I've just been sick about it!"

Norman, recalled to gravity by her mood, was now sitting erect and scowling at the floor.

"Why do you pay any attention to May Henderson? She's a liar," he said ungallantly.

"Come on, now, you bad boy!" said Pidgy coquettishly, little hands on his shoulders. "Five minutes—that's all, and then we'll come back and have lunch!"

Hildegard hated her, hated her, hated her—common little smug chatterbox!—as she led Norman away. It was only three times the promised five minutes, after all, before they came back, Pidgy obviously much happier for her little walk along the confused holiday water front. For the last

of the fog had vanished, and the day was breathless and smoking hot. Firecrackers, so insistent through all the morning hours, were still, except for occasional hiccoughing explosions, and the flags hung motionless upon their poles.

The others had taken their places about the board; Hildegard between Mr. Eaton and Floss, Pidgy and Norman together. But before she slipped into her chair Pidgy must go behind her mother, and whisper into the fringes and veils and ribbons that obscured the older woman's ear.

"Norman thinks I did right, Ma," said Pidgy audibly, with side glances for the circle.

"Now, do you, Norman?" Mrs. Warner asked heavily, dubiously.

"Sure—she can do a lot better than that!" Norman approved, carving ham.

"It was a party that wanted to marry me," Pidgy now confessed to the company, taking her seat, "and May Henderson said that Norman told her that I'd ought to marry him. But, however, I wouldn't of married him for ten millions of dollars!" she added, tossing her head, sweeping the others' faces with a superior glance, and elevating a plate for some food.

"Oh, *no*, you wouldn't—wait, here's some fat," said Norman indulgently.

"Well, I wouldn't!"

"If he'd offered you the part he offered Mazie you would of!"

"Oh, well," conceded Pidgy, dimpling, looking down, as one betrayed into an unwilling admission. Everyone laughed, Hilda, too; she dared not be discovered unsympathetic.

But she didn't believe any one had ever asked Pidgy Warner to marry him—Pidgy was twenty, anyway—it was time someone did, if they were ever going to! And to lead Norman away, and make ground with him by asking his advice, such a patent ruse to interest him! She, Hildegard, her heart bursting with anger and pain and jealousy, was only

fifteen—only fifteen, and a nobody, to the other girl's twenty, and her professional security, and her fame!

The conversation was all about Pidgy; she kept it so. Oh, remember the night they all did thus and thus—remember old Porter, the day he got so mad—remember the poor boy, what was his name?—who got such a mash on Pidgy he hung 'round her school and shoved poetry into her hands. . . .

Eventually Hildegarde and Eaton and Floss and Mrs. Warner were maintaining a conversation at one end of the table, and Pidgy had wheeled her chair about so that it, and her rounded young body in it, almost shut Norman away from the others, and so that she could talk, elbow on the table, and cheek propped in her hand, to him alone.

Three o'clock. Hildegarde wished that she was dead. The satin bay was motionless at still-water, between the tides; quiet reigned on the nearby houseboats, where bunting drooped, and pink and gray flags hung lifeless. Only occasionally there was the discharge of a whole pack of crackers somewhere in the village—fzz—fzz—snap—snap!—and from the end of the island faint cries and shouts where people were bathing. A blue haze seemed to hang like a curtain from the sky and veil land and water alike in uncertain milky pal-lors.

"Well, are we going to swim?" presently asked Pidgy. An interval of lazy argument ensued: "Less. Less not. Oh, less. Why not? Less."

In the end they walked leisurely the shaded mile of road above the sea, to the bathhouse, and Hildegarde clung to the rope and splashed up and down, wretchedly talking to the amiable and amusing Courtney Eaton. Her first time in the water, it might have been so thrilling, so enchanting an experience!

But not with Pidgy Warner and Norman lying on the raft, a hundred yards away, talking—talking. Hildegarde went up to the hot, dry-wood scented bathhouse to dress before they swam in, Pidgy's filmy, limp underwear, her bangles and chains, as they hung innocently upon the rusty nails of

the bathhouse, awakening an impulse almost murderous in the younger girl's heart.

She and Courtney preceded the others home, Hilda quite liking the foolish, giggling young man before the afternoon was over. She made sure that she and Courtney were in gales of laughter when Norman and Pidgy got back, and so successful was the pretense that it carried the two into a sort of friendship—a sort of desperate fellowship. If she could not hold Norman, Hilda thought angrily, she could make herself amusing to the others.

At the impromptu supper at eight o'clock she was at least easy. She could fly to the kitchen now for more butter. Floss consulted her as to cream and bread, she was a member of the family, for all Pidgy's airs. She sat next to Walt, the soft light of a Japanese lantern just above her head, and attended his wants like a daughter. More than once she made them all laugh; there was a story of Cliffy that forced Floss to lay her brightly streaked head on the table, that won even Norman's approving roar.

And Pidgy's was the type of charm, after all, that suddenly dropped, that suddenly went stale. Hildegard could have placed, almost to a second, the time when Pidgy's shallow chatter and complacent laughter began to pall upon the company.

The conversation became more general; it was Hilda's turn. She glowed, in the soft evening lights, like a star. Her soft tawny hair was rumpled, her blue eyes, in their shadowy, heavy fringes, shone brilliantly, feverishly, with fatigue and excitement.

Floss sat back, out of the immediate circle of the lantern light, relaxed in her chair. She was listening, drowsing, her occasional comment was made in a sleep-heavy voice. Walt, warmed to flattering memories of Ada Rehan and Georgia Cayvan and Mansfield, had wheeled his chair sidewise to the table, and sat grinding out cigarette after cigarette as he recounted old triumphs. Mrs. Warner's recollections were sentimental.

"Just an innocent baby girl, adrift in a strange city, that's

all I was," Mrs. Warner admitted. "'You ain't fifteen,' he says to me. With that the tears came! 'I'm a widow,' I told him, 'I lost the best husband God ever made. . . .'"

Pidgy, bored, wearied, sat gnawing chocolates; Norman was beside her, but his looks now were all for Hildegarde. Courtney Eaton, never really contributing, was yet never quite still.

The talk was all of the profession, of old plays, old actors; it opened a new world to Hildegarde, the world of the spotlight and the greenroom. For the first time she heard of Broadway.

Broadway! When she saw it, years afterward, she tried to remember the dream she had dreamed of it, a dream born on a summer night, under the stars that looked down upon the ebbing tide of Tiburon's lipping waters and the supper group on the *Florence*.

Dark streets—city streets—with carriages threading them, and flashing lights lacing them. Praise. Excitement. Restaurants. And one's friends, after the success of the new play, gathering about long tables, raising glasses.

"Her name in electric lights on Broadway," someone was saying. It was Floss. "And I knew her when her and her mother was sneaking into a little forty-cent tobbedote on Thirty-ninth Street," Floss was adding scornfully. "'I'm so sorry, Floss,' she says, 'but the free list is suspended to-night because of Adele being such a hit,' she says. 'I'll get you seats for the second night!' she told me. 'Oh?' I says; 'but any night'll do,' I says. 'It ought to run for two weeks, anyway!'"

Their delicious vanity, their lovable childishness, their utter shiftless unreliability impressed the girl who was listening to them, young and inexperienced as she was. But it was a world of fairyland in which they lived, and if such pathetically ill-equipped voyagers could make any haven at all, what might not another voyager do, one equipped with courage and youth, and beauty, perhaps, one who would not stoop to these petty encounters, or go out of her way to make even insignificant enemies?

"If he thought I was going to dress in a place you wouldn't of put a sick cat into . . ." This was Mrs. Warner. What difference did the dressing room make? sang Hilda's soul. Just to get in, on any terms, however humiliating. Time enough to laugh in their faces when one had gained one's footing. Walt's story was of the manager who promised him he might "open the second"—by which Hilda already understood first place on a vaudeville bill after the intermission—and who then came down to his dressing room to plead with him, even while the house was filling, for a change of place.

"What's eating you, Lew?' I asked him," said Walt, with an incredible refinement of manner. "'I don't get this. Miss Emma Carus is one of the sweetest women in God's world,' I says . . ."

Hilda leaned back, not so entranced but what she suspected the watching black eyes opposite. She could glance about easily; she need not meet his glance. There was moonshine on the water now, but how different from last night's moonshine—how much older she was!

Lanterns had bloomed on the houseboats, great swaying oblong globes of pale colour making dim blotches of darker light in the motionless water below them. A concertina was playing.

"The Blue Danube," Norman said to her. But he didn't use her name, and she needn't hear him.

Her glorious eyes roved childishly; she knew he was watching her now. The stretched awning above her head, their own lanterns, the twisted ropes of the morning-glory vines, the water with the moonlight rising and swelling and dipping on its molten darkness. And lingering about the table this group of odd persons—actors, vaudeville headliners who knew far-away mysterious Broadway with its voices and lights, who had seen snow and thunderstorms.

The waltz swayed on; Walt hummed it. Hildegard did not know whether she was tired, or sleepy, or a little dizzy; her head began to swim deliciously, her senses were all swooning together.

A rocket whizzed up, cutting a sharp hole in the soft, warm air; they all ran to the rail to see it burst high against the stars and melt into a fountain of crawling brilliant lines. And when they seated themselves at the rail to be ready for the next one, Norman was somehow beside Hilda, as she knew he would be, and all the day's agony of pain and doubt was wiped away, and she was happy again.

His big fingers closed over hers, she leaned back, almost against his shoulder, his face close to hers in the gloom.

College boys singing with a banjo in some little passing boat. The concertina had stopped now, and their voices could fill the throbbing, midsummer darkness undisputed.

When you wore a tulip,
A bright yellow tulip——

Then silence, and clapping from every direction, and then more song:

And when I tell them
How beautiful you are——

Norman dropped his face only an inch.

"How beautiful you are!" he echoed, hardly above his breath.

Hildegard trembled. She felt a wild, sweet fear of she knew not what. He oughtn't—he oughtn't. But why oughtn't he say he loved her? She breathed deep, her fingers in his in the dark, her eyes on the bay, where little lights, red, green, blue, were moving, were still.

Another rocket, hissing fiercely upward, another long-drawn "ah-h-h-h!" another sprawling chrysanthemum on the dark sky. The drooping tentacles burst in their turn into fresh sprays of magic stars. Hildegard gasped with joy.

"Stunning!" said Pidgy, directly to Norman. But he wouldn't notice her! He wouldn't notice her!

"It'll be thtunning if one of them fallth on thombodyth roof," suggested Courtney, and they all laughed.

"We've got to go home to-night, Court," Pidgy said. But she looked at Norman.

"That's what I thought when I seen that boat go out a few minutes ago," Mrs. Warner added, "I said, 'My God, I hope there's another boat to-night!' Floss, why didn't you tell us?"

"Why didn't you give us the bums' rush?" asked Pidgy. And she was rewarded by Norman's ready laugh.

"It's only ten," he said, "that was the nine-forty. We'll take 'em to the ten-seventeen, hey, Hilda?"

"We could put you up, dear," Floss, back on her deck chair, said unctuously. "No trouble at all. Walt's going to town on that, anyway. Two in Norm's room, Norman out here, Hilda on the couch in my room——"

"I floating on the thee," finished Courtney Eaton.

"Dearie, I wouldn't leave you bother for an instant!" said Mrs. Warner appreciatively. "There's a feller coming to look at my furnished room in the morning. Maybe Pidgy would stay?" she added doubtfully, glancing at her daughter.

Hildegarde trembled. Pidgy Warner, staying to spoil their last hours together! The thought was insupportable. To-morrow, at an early hour, she, Hildegarde, must be on her way home, spinning down the Peninsula to school, returning at noon to Mama's disorderly hot kitchen, to the whining of Lloyd and Cliffy and Stuart and George, to the broken strips of dark linoleum and the chipped plates and damp dish rags and rickety chairs.

And Pidgy might stay—blighting their world of moonshine and rippling water and soft summer darkness and faint scent of stale gunpowder, and of tarweed wet with the first bitter-sweet dew on the hills.

"Ma, I've got to see Gates in the morning," Pidgy reminded her parent.

"That's right, too!" Mrs. Warner assented, nodding.

Presently, lumberingly and with many delays, the visitors gathered their various scattered possessions for departure and crossed the little gangplank to the shore, Hildegarde and Norman escorting them. The night was still warm, the stars

seemed alive, throbbing and pressing close upon the flushed face Hilda raised to the darkness.

It was something after ten o'clock—still early, early enough for Norman and herself to loiter, coming back from the boat, beside the dark tide that was at the full now, under the shabby little cheaply made houseboats, *El Nido* and *Bide-a-wee*. The Japanese lanterns had flickered out, one by one, and the firecrackers and rockets were spent. But in the soft night air the acrid stimulating odour of gunpowder lingered, with the brackish odour of the shore, and the dry summertime smell of fields and tarweed on the low brown hills.

Belvedere rose, a solid block of mellow shadow, against the faint light in the west; among her rounded oaks red lights twinkled, scattered gems, above the regular line of sparkling jewels that marked the shore. The sea was so still that the slowly swinging lights of the shipping were mirrored by slowly swinging lights in the tide. Miles away San Francisco slept upon her seven hills, the low line of the world was punctured and pricked with sparks of gold and red; the silver stars burned, throbbed, burned steadily again.

On their right, as Norman and Hilda walked slowly back, were the hills, crouching like brown leopards against the deep blue of the star-spattered sky. Close to the irregularly rambling water-side street clung the little shops, vomiting light, showing silhouetted dark forms against red windows. Voices whined, laughed, protested; a piano, a concertina, sounded fitfully.

"Kiss me, Hilda," Norman said, in a low, shaken voice, halting her in a dark bit of road, putting his arms about her.

She felt her heart plunge, begin to thump, thump, thump almost painfully in her breast, as she obediently raised her soft child-mouth. This was the moment for which she had been waiting all through the long, gunpowder-scented day with its drooping flags, and white-skirted girls, and Japanese lanterns, and blue, rippling water.

Again the ecstasy that had left her hungry—thirsty—unsatisfied, for twenty-four unreal hours. Their young bodies

clung together, their hearts beat together, their lips burned together.

A long moment. Then they were walking decorously along again, toward the *Florence*. But now their fingers were linked, and Hilda could feel throughout her whole body the thrilling current of his racing blood.

"Zat you, Norman?" Floss called sleepily from her room, as they stumbled through the warm, food-scented darkness of the houseboat to the moon-flooded, disordered porch.

"Yep," Norman said, in an oddly gruff voice.

"Hilda, you can come in here with me, or sleep out there, if you don't mind the mess!" Floss called. "Better undress and leave your things in here, anyway. I was just too tired to touch a thing."

"All right," Hilda called back. And she and Norman began to straighten the porch, carrying plates into the little kitchen, forcing crumpled papers and paper napkins into the big rubbish basket in the hall, jerking chairs about.

Cigarette ashes. Candle grease. The Katzenjammers, pink and blue in dim light. Crumbs. Food not worth saving, food worth saving.

They had laughed, this morning, over sponge cake. But they did not laugh now. Swift, feverishly business-like, they passed and repassed each other, and when Norman's fingers touched the girl's, as they reached simultaneously for the rumpled tablecloth, she felt them hot, and they evaded each other's eyes.


"Don't bother out there, I've nothing to do all day tomorrow!" called Floss.

"We won't!" Norman called back. He called it over Hilda's shoulder; they were standing at the end of the porch, where the awning stopped, and they could see only the world of the stars, and the softly flung scarf of the Milky Way, infinitely tender and shielding over the heads of lovers. Norman's arms were tight about Hilda's shoulders, her flower of a face was upturned and washed into unearthly beauty by the moonshine.

So she stood for a moment, in the last few hours of her

girlhood, the aureole of glorious tawny hair, loosened a little, soft and blurred against her temples, her deep eyes wide open, fringed like those of an up-glancing baby angel on some old canvas, her young breasts showing a faint swell under the thin Swiss gown, her firm, girlish chin raised to lift the lips that burned like poppies from his kisses.

About them was the gently pulsing slip-slip-slip of the tide, surging slowly but irresistibly under all the cheap rabble of shore-line houses, purifying, clean, scented with salt. Above their heads the solemn stars winked, and throbbed, and winked again. The rest was darkness and silence, fragrant of summer fields, and the long day's Fourth-of-July festivities, and the sweet-peas that grew on the eastern side of the porch, their feet in the common wooden box upon which "Princess Laundry Soap" was stencilled, but their winged blooms straining like captive butterflies, pale under the moon.



CHAPTER IX

IT WAS one of her dreaming afternoons, when she herself, Hildegard Sessions, seemed to slip out of her body, seemed to float and hang somewhere up against the dull schoolroom ceiling. September. Five weeks of the term gone already.

Tick. Tick. Tick. That was the big clock. Its hands stood at ten minutes past two. In less than an hour she would go out into the big wide hallway that smelled of chalk and rubber coats and lunch boxes, and put on her blue coat, and her tam, and start homeward in the dirty summer wind.

A gray warm wind; "trade winds," everyone called them. It was moving like a wall along the grimy street, sweeping straw and chaff and papers wildly ahead of it. Women's hats would careen, and most travellers would avoid the outside seats on the car. But Hilda would sit outside, perhaps near to her favourite red-headed motorman, who liked her. They often talked when she came to and fro.

Maybe Sidney Penfield would be on the same car. Sometimes he drove his automobile, but whenever his automobile was out of order he had to take the trolley at three-twenty. Sidney was still coaching; he had failed of his entrance examinations for college, and he had a tutor in the city. He came in to town rather later in the mornings than Hilda did; she had to leave the house in the Dump at quarter-past eight and catch the eight-twenty car. But they often met in the afternoons.

She liked him, although something guarded, impersonal in his attitude repelled her just a little. For all his easiness and his friendliness, one felt that he was always conscious of the fact that he was a Penfield, one of the rich aristocratic families on the Peninsula.

He dressed smartly, in tweed knickers and thick stockings; he was amusing, too. And Hilda would say scornfully to herself that Sidney Penfield need not be on guard with her, need not fear her. She was beloved by a far finer man than he would ever be!

Norman. He was away now, somewhere, anywhere—it didn't matter; actors were always moving about. But the memory of those hours in Belvedere, that warm Fourth-of-July night when the stars reflected themselves in the rippling tide, that night of moon-washed flowers and the dry, tarry scent of sharp dew on the fields, was still the most vivid, the most vital thing in the girl's life.

At first, moving mysteriously radiant and newly silent about her father's squalid home, she had marvelled that her secret love, her deeply absorbing joy, were not written on her face for all to read. How *could* they go on talking to her as if she were only a little girl? Norman Montgomery loved her; they were going to be married. She had awakened overnight, the world was all changed; it was *comprehensible*, it was thrilling and satisfying, at last.

For a day or two the rôle of demurely unchanged daughter had been enough; memories were all she needed, marvellous, exquisite memories, and Hilda had taken them out like jewels, one by one, and studied them, and put them away again.

And then sharply had come the need of Norman, and she had seen him again, meeting him in Golden Gate Park, near the Japanese garden, upon a cold, sombre, foggy August afternoon, when her excuse to escape from home and get into town was that she would see Mabel, in the hospital, and find out about the conditions of the Teachers' Institute.

But she wouldn't finish Teachers' Institute now; she would be married long before that! They hoped to be married soon, when he came back to the city. Walt and Floss had wandered eastward again, Norman had gone away on his road tour, with Hildegard's tear-wet kisses warm on his cheeks, and, because there seemed to be nothing else to do, Hildegard had duly entered the Teachers' Institute in San Fran-

cisco. But she wouldn't finish! She was going to be married.

Grown up—and so suddenly! A veil seemed to have fallen from her eyes. She was not yet sixteen, but she was already looking back at her old self as upon a person singularly stupid and ignorant and young.

Through Miss Doyle, her old teacher during the last year of High School, she had been well introduced to the new studies. Everyone liked her, everything was easy and simple. Some of Kate Doyle's kindly last advice lingered with her; she formed a new life, a new ideal for herself upon the words.

"Hildegarde, we all think you're such an unusually fine girl, dear," the teacher had said wistfully.

"Oh, Miss Doyle——"

"No, truly dear, I mean it. And there's no reason why you shouldn't know it! You've worked so well here, getting through in two and a half years, and you've developed so fast. I know things are not always easy for you at home," Miss Doyle had stumbled on, a little awkwardly—these children of the slums were so strangely loyal to their dreadful homes!—"but I do believe that you'll have a great influence upon all those little brothers and sisters of yours, Hilda, if you go on as you are going! You must keep at your history and English literature, dear, join the public library, read good books. And you'll remember what we've studied in the domestic science course, about budgets, and balanced foods, and keeping yourself well? Some of the most famous people in the world—almost all the richest and most successful, have come from homes as—*as* simple as yours is," Kate Doyle had said.

Hilda had glowed under the praise, deeply pleased. But already there was within her soul a faint feeling of superiority for this good, middle-aged, unmarried woman. Miss Doyle must be almost thirty! And Hilda was beloved, was going to be married; a man's kisses were set upon her mouth, a man's stamp upon her soul.

"Hold to what's good—what's fine, Hilda. I believe you

will! In speech and manner, niceness goes so far. And if you can't do everything at once—I know your mother's delicate, and there are so many younger children, why, just be patient—things will gradually improve!" the teacher had said, one arm about the young shoulders. "You don't know how far you've come," she had encouraged. "You were the roughest, naughtiest little gipsy I ever saw when you came to Miss Fallon's room nearly ten years ago."

Ragged, bewildered, mischievous, rebellious—Hilda could remember the student of the Lower Second. The tousled head, the baggy gray underwear always buttonless and torn, the chewed pencils, the scratched slates. . . .

"I must have been a case," she had mused smilingly, smiling at the memory of that child to-day, when she stood tall and trim beside her teacher in her graduation dress, a girl who had had a ninety-six mark in history, whose theme had been chosen to be read aloud at Commencement, whose instructors boasted that she was the sort of pupil who made teaching worth while. And her tawny hair had been pinned into a soft, shining crown, and beneath the ruffles of the dotted Swiss graduation dress that a Chinaman had made from Mama's goods for one dollar and ten cents, the starched ruffles of her embroidered petticoat had stood stiffly forth. Hildegard Sessions, graduating from High School before she was sixteen.

She had been thinking about Norman Montgomery even then, Hilda recalled, even though they had barely made each other's acquaintance at that time. That had been before the Fourth of July.

And now it was September, and she was bending her distracted thoughts to the Teachers' Institute studies, and Norman was travelling somewhere in the north with a stock company. He sent her postcards, he was a poor letter writer, and she sent him long, passionately loving replies. For his sake, her handwriting, sprawling and childish, grew up overnight, too, and became compact, restrained; her first new teacher commented upon it.

"You've an odd handwriting, Miss Sessions. I like it."

Hilda's bright flush, under the tawny crown, her blue eyes suddenly liquid and alive.

"Oh, do you?—I'm glad," she said eagerly. "Miss Doyle taught me that, really—she saw some words I had drawn, under a map, and she said, 'Hilda, you really ought to take a little more time, and write those drawn letters.' But," Hilda confessed, "I never did it for her. I just took a sudden fancy to do it lately."

"Drawn—that's what they look. They're so beautifully legible, like copper plate," Miss Baker said. "Now you've begun, you must keep it up."

Hilda wrote her first long letter to Norman on ruled, smooth ten-cent tablets of pinkish paper. But one day Miss Baker happened to say to her class that a lady never used ruled paper, and after that the closely packed characters moved across a blank creamy sheet.

My darling [she wrote him], you would laugh if you could know how everything I do, at home or here at school, or anywhere, is done with a funny sort of feeling as if you knew it, or as if you and I were talking about it. Mama can't get over it, she thinks I've gone crazy, I guess—and so I have, and you know over whom. While I'm putting the kitchen in order, and cooking for Pop and the boys, I feel as if it were our little house I was taking care of, and it makes me giggle way down inside. How I'll love that little first house of ours, even if it's only a room! I'm so crazily in love—I guess I oughtn't to tell you this—but I've gotten so that I hate to have anything interrupt my thinking of you, and if I have a recitation or anything, I'm always thinking of the time when I can get back to remembering those hours in Belvedere.

And in return he would scribble on a picture postcard,

Big house last night, we may get as far west as Kansas City. May have news in my next letter. N.

or

Wish you were here. Miss D. dropped out, and you could of stepped into a good part this week. N.

Even these brief messages were not well written or grammatically correct, but Hilda, herself becoming quite a purist,

only smiled at that. He didn't have to be grammatical! He didn't have to be anything else but just Norman, handsome, white-skinned, with his black hair hanging in a wing across his forehead, with that half-boyish, half-sophisticated, wholly adorable droop to his mouth.

Tick. Tick. Tick. She was in the schoolroom on a warm, windy late summer afternoon; there was a recitation going forward, but she was merely preparing her work for to-morrow. To-morrow would be Friday; no mathematics, calisthenics and English. She might be asked to "review in a manner comprehensible to Eighth Grade" any one of five books: "Henry Esmond," "The Merchant of Venice," "The Heart of Midlothian," "Paradise Lost," "The Lady of the Lake."

She knew them all except "Paradise Lost," and she determined that if they were dismissed to-day at ten minutes before the hour, as often happened, she would rush upstairs to the library and spend twenty minutes over the Milton volume of the "Half Hours with the Classics." In that time she would be able to grasp pretty thoroughly what "Paradise Lost" was about, and if it proved really interesting, she could borrow somebody's slim red marked and annotated schoolroom copy, and absorb it more leisurely later on.

But she wouldn't be questioned to-morrow. When one sat absorbed and eager, bursting with the subject of the circulation of blood or the Rule of the Ptolemies, one never was called upon. Except that sometimes during an especially disgraceful recitation one might be elected by sheer force of elimination to the place of teacher one's self.

"Miss Sessions, I wonder if you'll please tell this singularly intelligent class what a compound sentence is? This work should have been done in the Fifth Grade, of course. . . ."

The walls were high, broken by high bare windows; eight southern windows, that had to be shaded on too-bright days, four northern windows, never shaded at all. Oyster-gray walls, with a dado of pinned pages all along them, except where the blackboards were. Algebraic and geometrical problems half erased on the boards, and the length and page

places of to-morrow's lessons written in a cleared space above in Miss Baker's nervous, fine hand.

Chalk dust, pencil dust, and the smell of ink. Her finger was inky; Hildegarde sucked it, tasting the familiar vinegary flavour of the ink.

These long warm days in the schoolroom were oddly tiring, her face felt flushed and her soft hair was frowsy. She rested her elbows on the desk and covered her face with her warm, inky fingers, and yawned. She sat erect, and looked dreamily at the raised unpainted dais where Miss Knowles sat at a plain desk littered with weighted papers and with one moss rose curved in a small vase for decoration.

Miss Knowles was older than pretty Miss Baker, older even than Miss Doyle had been. Miss Knowles wore glasses, and thin, flat shirt waists whose cuffs she protected by rolls of clean paper—foolscap. Her fingers, when they touched Hilda's, in the giving out of pens or the restoring of themes, were thin, cool, veiny, trembling. They were always clean with an unearthly cleanliness. Miss Knowles lived with a sister, also a teacher, in McAllister Street, up near the Cemetery, and Hildegarde only knew of her besides that she was very religious.

She had liked Hildegarde at once; it was a part of the growing joy and triumph of Hilda's life that all teachers did. They liked to draw her out, and Hilda knew they liked it. She knew she was being studied, when she leaned on the teacher's desk at recess time, drooped her tawny head, and looked up with quick smiles through her long, thick lashes.

"So you have four brothers and a sister, Hilda? My, what a big family. I didn't know that!"

"You might have guessed it when I said my father and mother were as poor as church mice, Miss Knowles."

And then the teacher's rewarding, half-shocked laugh.

"But one sister is in the hospital?"

"Mabel, yes. Hip disease. It doesn't cost anything to have that, you know!"

Again Miss Knowles's spontaneous tribute of laughter.

"You live—San Bruno, is it?"

"Not strictly, no. You must get off at Bay Lane, and pass some shops, and a warehouse and a few factories, and then cross the tracks, where there's usually a long string of 'empties,' and then turn toward the Dump—the road is so bad you'd better only follow your nose there, and then you see a square white house, high up on stilts, very charmingly decorated in a design of water-stains and mud-balls, and looking as if it ought to move half a block farther and join the rest of the rubbish—that's the family seat of the Sessions."

No bitterness, if there was a trace of tempering sadness, in the child's exquisite, wide blue eyes, the watching teacher might note wonderingly.

"Come, now, it isn't as bad as that?"

"It's pretty bad. But," Hildegard always said confidently, "as soon as things get a little better, we are going to move, and my father doesn't feel it worth while to do anything to the place. My mother has always detested the neighbourhood."

"It must be the mother who has the good blood, the mother from whom she gets that quality of hers," the teacher might muse, marking a "97 per cent." on the exercise or the theme, and watching the girl go back to her seat with her shabby shoulders erect and her royal crown of hair held high.

And on the particular September afternoon when Hildegard was as usual in a pleasant dream over her work for the following day, Miss Knowles said suddenly: "Miss Sessions—just a moment!" and Hildegard, rousing, went up to the desk.

"Miss Sessions, you're so much interested in the French Revolution, I wonder if you'd like to stay in town with me on Tuesday night and use my sister's ticket for a lecture, an extension course that the Mechanics' Library gives every winter. The speaker is a Berkeley professor, a most interesting man, Professor Lincoln Barker."

"I'd love it!" Hildegard said eagerly. A night in the city on any terms! Lighted streets and crowded cars, the theatre district, the scraping of feet—feet—feet on the sidewalks.

"Well, speak to your mother about it, then, will you?"

And you can come down with me in the morning to school. My sister's substituting in an Oakland school this week, and she stays with my aunt. And by the way," Miss Knowles said, with a glance at the clock, "it's twenty minutes of three, if you have any research to do upstairs——?"

"It was just that I thought I'd like to look up 'Paradise Lost'; we didn't have that this term, I don't know why, although I've always meant to read it anyway. I thought I'd get an idea of what it was, and then borrow a copy, and glance through it as I come and go on the trolley."

"I may have a copy here—I have." Miss Knowles groped in her orderly, crowded desk, brought forth a chalk-dusty, ink-marked, flat red book. "It's disgraceful," she said, batting it gently in her clean, cool, nervous fingers, "But you can read it. You don't have to stay, to-day, if you like."

"Thank you!" The girl's insatiable eyes were already flying over the opening lines. She was reading "Paradise Lost" five minutes later as she made her way upstairs.

CHAPTER X

SIDNEY PENFIELD was on the trolley this afternoon; sometimes he was nice, sometimes he was nasty and stuck-up. This was one of his good days, when he was just a friendly, laughing, handsome boy.

Hildegard got her favourite seat, up against the glass guard in front, beside her friendly motorman, where she could square herself about to face Sidney fully as they spun southward.

The world looked bare and shabby in autumn; yellow leaves careened and sailed high against a cool, sunshiny sky; leaf fires sent blowing columns of smoke fragrantly into the air. The girl had brushed her hair, at school, and plunged her hands and face into cold refreshing water; her velvet cheeks glowed, the wind had loosened little gold tendrils to catch with shining tentacles the rough woolly texture of her tam-o'-shanter.

"Kites—look at them! Don't you love them?"

It was the girl speaking, her dancing blue eyes upon some children upon a bare hill.

"I never could get mine up," the boy confessed.

"Oh, mine! It used nearly to pull me off the earth—I used to adore the feeling! Being dragged along helter-skelter—with that wild thing plunging and pulling! The last time my father whipped me," Hilda remembered, smiling, "was once when I took an old shirt of his out of the wash-basket in the kitchen for a tail for my kite. It seems it was his favourite shirt, but I thought it was just rags."

"I guess he didn't kill you," Sidney Penfield said, surprised that any one had ever whipped this nice girl, so jolly and gallant and hard-working and pretty.

"Not quite!" But Hilda's eyes darkened a moment, as

she remembered her own frantic, blind struggles, her desperate screams and protests, her heavy, choked heaving and sobbing for a long while afterward.

"I could have taken the three o'clock car to-day, my coach was sick," he said.

"Oh, why didn't you?"

"Oh, well, I thought you might be on this one—I like company," he said, in a tone that betrayed his own innocent surprise that it should be so.

"H'm!" she said, astonished in her turn, making the soft little velvety sound a Shetland makes, and with a Shetland's shy upward look through a loosened, blown mane.

"I was talking to my mother about you the other night, and I wondered if you ever had liked a boy?" Sidney presently said, quite steadily, but slowly, and with an obvious determination to finish his sentence once he had begun it.

Flying winds, flying leaves, cool autumn sunlight and pale blue sky. The car hummed, stopped, hummed on its way again.

Hilda coloured, smiled, dimpled suddenly. This was not quite a chance to talk of Norman, but she could come close to it.

"Oh, I liked that red-headed boy, Joe Carter, pretty well—when I was just a kid. He used to buy me pencils and walk as far as Bay Lane with me," she said, smiling a radiantly confidential smile, by way of introduction of the greater subject.

"I never knew that!" Sidney said thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes! I liked him. Did you?"

"Not much. His—wasn't his father in the grocery?" Sidney asked ungenerously, a little shamefacedly.

But she turned the shaft innocently.

"Yes—they were awfully well-to-do. His father had a grocery in Los Angeles, too; they're down there now. Why?" Hilda questioned, enjoying the delicate topic. "Have you ever liked a girl—have you ever had a girl?"

"I guess I haven't had much use for them!" Sidney admitted, with a gruff laugh and a brief upward glance.

"I thought you liked girls, I imagined you had piles of them, and danced with them, and everything," Hilda told him artlessly.

"Oh, I dance all right," Sidney said modestly. "But it's with my cousins, the Porters, or Isabelle Rogers, mostly."

The Porters or Isabelle Rogers! Names so sacred as to appear rarely even in the social calendar! And yet he was scowling, yet he looked bored.

"Are they your cousins?"

"We're *all* cousins. Reids and Rogers and Craigies."

"Fun!" Hildegard commented, with a swift vision of home parties—Thanksgiving dinners—Christmas trees.

"I used to hate that red-headed Carter kid—I only saw him when he was kept in, but that was about every day," Sidney began again suddenly, after a few miles of spinning silence. "He used to lay his head on the desk, and look up over his sleeve, while I was having my Latin with Miss Doyle."

"I can see him doing it!" Hildegard said, laughing at the memory. "He sent me a Valentine once." But, of course that was only a sort of kid affair; I don't suppose he'd know me if he met me now," she finished briskly and sensibly.

"We all get those cases when we're young," Sidney said, sighing, at nineteen.

Hildegard, her heart a storehouse bursting with treasure, could not be silent. She fixed the dreamy gaze of her blue eyes upon space, a dimple deepened the peach glow of her cheek.

"And then, when the real thing comes——" she said lightly, significantly, as if half to herself.

Sidney watched her uneasily.

"Well—well—but, Hilda, you wouldn't go in for that sort of thing until you'd finished your Teachers' Institute work?" he asked boyishly, awkwardly. "I—I'm sure *my* mother wouldn't want *me* to, until I'd finished college and gotten a start with the firm. My brother Jay's seven years older than I am, and he's just married now."

"Wouldn't it depend upon when it just came naturally?" the girl demanded.

He was studying her suspiciously; his honest, handsome young face was very red.

"Well, but—well, but—you wouldn't make up your mind *now*, would you, Hilda? You couldn't tell what you wanted *now*!"

She was so much older than he, for all his nineteen years to her fifteen! She smiled at him thoughtfully, her tam-o'-shantered head on one side. The luxury of confidence was too delicious to be foregone.

"I *might*," she teased.

Sidney was silent for a while, his puzzled, annoyed eyes travelling over her radiant face.

"You don't like any boy," he stated stubbornly.

"But how about a—*man*?"

"A man?" He was red again with resentment.

"Twenty-two." She let the syllables fall deliberately, savouring them. She was talking about Norman!

"Yes, you know somebody twenty-two who's in love with you!" he drawled suspiciously, scornfully.

"Well, I *do*!"

"Yes, you do!"

"I *must* say I don't think you're very flattering!" said Hilda with her little-girl laugh. "You don't have to believe me!"

"I'd believe you if you said it, of course," Sidney said, with a suddenly grand air. "But I thought you were fooling."

He was a gentleman, after all; there was something distinctly thrilling in the way he stopped fooling, in the deference he displayed toward her secret, if she chose to keep it a secret.

"No," she said, sobered herself, and feeling an inexplicable impulse toward tears, "no, I'm not fooling."

He was embarrassed, boyish, red in the face.

"You mean there really *is* someone?" he demanded bluntly. And all their laughter was gone; Hilda was looking at him as uncomfortably as he looked at her.

"I haven't said anything about it at home," she began, a little frightened.

"You mean you haven't told your mother?"

"Do you—" she countered nervously—"do you think I ought to?"

"Certainly I think you ought to!" he said sharply and crossly.

"Well, of course I will, before I'm *married*," Hildegard began feebly. Sidney gave her a scornful look.

"Well, I should *hope* so!" he said loftily. "Let's—let's talk about something else! Is it any one I know?" he added at once with simplicity.

"Oh, it's nobody—it's nothing!" Hilda assured him hastily, really alarmed, now that her affair was assuming such startling importance. "It's just—just a boy that liked me, and that—that writes to me sometimes."

"Did he *say* he liked you?" Sidney demanded sternly.

"Oh, no!" she answered untruthfully.

"And he didn't——"

The boy's voice thickened suddenly. He had moved so close to her that he could put his arm along the back of the seat, almost about her. He had lowered his tones, his face was drooping close to hers, his cheeks were burning red.

"He didn't—you know what I mean—some girls let fellows——" he began again confusedly.

"Kiss me?" Hildegard's lips said, close to his own. She raised the lowered eyes, met his glance with one adorably confused, adorably shy. "Oh, of course not!" she said.

"Well, I didn't think you would!" Sidney said, breathing deeply in relief. His tone became confidential, brotherly. "You ought to leave boys alone for a while," he advised her.

Another dutiful, abashed flash of the wonderful eyes. No use to expect him to sympathize about Norman, Hildegard decided, already becoming wise in the manners of men.

"I won't!" she promised weakly.

"Because look here—look here," Sidney mumbled on, "you know that a fellow you were crazy about when you were just sixteen—why, you couldn't stand him when you were—say, twenty-five."

"That's true," Hilda said seriously, as if struck. "But

you've passed your corner, Sidney!" she interrupted herself to say suddenly. For he usually transferred, or was met by the family car, at Hillbrae.

"I know it!" he said superbly, and she could have laughed at his youthful magnificence. But when he had left her at Bay Lane, to run alone up the incredibly shabby and jumbled street toward the Dump, she thought that Sidney Penfield was a sweet boy, and that she would really have liked him if Norman hadn't come along first to monopolize every particle of love in her heart—in her whole being.

The postman, who lived in the neighbourhood, came at half-past five, and Hildegard was always ready for him. She would be watching through the kitchen window; she would flash out to the gate. If he came up this far at all, it meant a letter for the Sessions; there was no house beyond.

To-night—oh, ecstasy!—she saw him, unmistakable in his rubbed blue uniform, plodding—poor fellow!—wearily in the early dark. A letter—not a postcard—a letter!

Hildegard had waited so long for it, had anticipated this moment so many, many times, that she felt almost dizzy as she went back into the lighted kitchen. A bulky letter for Miss Hildegard Sessions.

Her father was not yet at home, her mother, stupefied with medicine by this time every night, was rocking with half-closed eyes. The boys' books had been flung on a chair, strapped and shabby, but the boys were still ranging the neighbourhood like young hawks. They were all wild; holy terrors, members of the gang. They could all feed and protect themselves, steal rides and apples, fill casual jobs of delivering meat or papers; even five-year-old George ran the streets until dark, and Cliffy and Lloyd, at fourteen and twelve, were already young men.

Hildegard held the precious bulky envelope to her breast for a moment, actually panting. It had come! It would be full of plans, of promises, of love. . . .

She tipped it to the light, and a moment's actual vertigo seized her, and the warm kitchen swam about her.

This letter was not from Norman. It was one of her own, to him, returned undelivered, with a dozen postmen's marks pencilled upon its face. "No such person—party unidentified—no such person."

It had been sent to theatres: "The Kinsey Theatre," "The Salt Lake Opera House," "The Tivoli, Portland."

Hildegard sat down at the table, bewildered and numb. Where was he? Why didn't he write and tell her where to send his letters? Why didn't he say when he was coming home, or find time to reassure her—to keep her in touch with his movements?

"No such person." And suppose her letter had fallen into Pop's hands? He would have been wild, wild at her secrecy, and wild to think that any man might want his daughter.

Apart from his affection, she was housekeeper now, she held her brothers in order, she was the very centre of the domestic scheme. Pop might not mind an occasional postcard, although even those Hilda had kept out of his sight, but he would not be apt to relish the idea of handing her over to some young man—the idea of losing her before she was seventeen!

She burned the letter, her own cheeks aflame, and Nelly opened her heavy eyes sleepily and smiled at her daughter, and drowsed in her rocker again.

"Bake some sweets, Hilda, and there's a steak there for your father," Nelly half said, half yawned. "There's some of the chopped meat, too, and there's a jelly roll."

"How do you feel to-night, Mama?"

"Oh, fine," Nelly sighed contentedly. She rarely had any more pain now, only she was always so weak and tired and sleepy that she spent most of the time in her chair. "You look tired, deary," she said.

Hildegard jerked on a valve, water rushed into the hot kettle with a great uprising of steam.

"Going to have tea, Mama?"

"I guess so. You might fry those cold whites for your Parpa, Hilda; the boys'll eat the sweets."

"The boys—one of them!—might come in once in a while and see if I need anything," Hildegard said irritably. "There's no butter."

And she went to the door and shouted into the darkness: "Cliff! Lloyd! Cliff!"

"There's some grease there in a cup," Nelly suggested.

"Yes, I know." She was coasting a lump of it about a slowly warming pan as she spoke. But her thoughts were far away. Where was Norman? Where—out in the blackness and bigness of the world—was Norman? Why didn't he come back to her?

She treasured her memories jealously. The words that had thrilled her, the firm, deep kisses that had made her heart turn to liquid fire, were they growing dimmer in her recollection?

Moonlight, and tethered sweet-peas drowning in its clear brilliance, and the lip-lip-lipping of the rising summer tide, and the little night wind wandering down with the sharp odour of first dews upon tarweed and brown grasses. . . .

She would not let them escape her. She lay awake, in the cold autumn nights, recalling them—seizing them—holding tightly to them all.

October came, without a letter. Even the postcards stopped. Hildegard, for a few weeks, could not believe it. He loved her, he had said he did! He couldn't—he *couldn't*—just walk out of her life. . . .

Of course he'd come back. But why didn't he write? Just a word—just a line—anything.

Sometimes moments of utter panic seized her. It was ridiculous to suppose that he had been merely playing—merely amusing himself, but suppose—suppose it were true!

She would shake herself out of this horrid fear with a philosophic laugh. Fool that she was—what time did a stock actor on the road have to spare for letters?

"But if he loved me as I love him," she would whisper to her sodden pillow, writhing in bitter tears in the dark, "he would—somehow!"

Shame and pride united for her relief. If he *were* that sort

of a man, better discover it now! He would never know how she suffered—it wouldn't kill her, she supposed. It never did kill people, according to the books.

But the suffocating agony of rebellion would rise up to wipe out this mood. Oh! she couldn't bear it—she couldn't bear it—never to see Norman again!

She would dry her eyes, blow her nose, settle down on her pillow. He would be back in a few weeks, and they would laugh at the wretchedness of this separation. Why, he had *said* he loved her—he had *said* it.

There might be a big, fat letter in the postman's hand to-night. And if there were, how ashamed she would be of all this ridiculous fussing and worrying. But she blamed herself for not having held him to a promise of at least a letter a week.

Why—why, she loved him, and she had absolutely nothing to show for it!

CHAPTER XI

SHE was standing at the blackboard in school one day when the Fear suddenly possessed her. At one moment, it was not. At the next it had seized her, as a tiger's teeth a fawn, and she knew that no earthly power could take her back to the peace of mind of just sixty seconds ago.

Erasing chalked figures, erasing chalked words and figures. The room wheeled with infinite, sickening slowness; she must go on erasing her chalked figures. Miss Baker had made them.

She would not faint—she would not faint. The room was full of students; all girls between seventeen and twenty—herself the youngest of them all.

Her mouth had filled with salt water, and she felt her spine cold and weak. To get away—to be alone—to scream and scream to herself that it was not true—that it was not true——

“Oh, my God!” she whispered. And after a moment, when she had blundered to her seat, and was sitting there, in a world suddenly gone black, she breathed it blindly again: “Oh, my God!”

It couldn't be true. Oh, my God! It couldn't be true; of course it wasn't.

The room was the familiar schoolroom. The high, oyster-gray walls were cut by high, uncurtained windows. Hilda swallowed with a dry throat, put her hands up to her hair; her hair was all right, she was all right, nobody had noticed anything.

She must go back to that thought, and face it calmly; she must not let it scare her this way. It was ridiculous.

“I didn't hear you, Miss Baker.” That was her usual friendly voice speaking.

"Will you put the next problem on the board, too, Miss Sessions? You don't mind? It saves me—when the B Class comes in——"

"Certainly!" This was Hilda Sessions, erect and confident and far ahead of the class, quietly, efficiently putting the problem on the board in a perfectly lucid form. She chalked away busily, looked at the book she held open in her left hand, chalked—as high as her hand could reach, on the board again.

She would not even look at the black horror that was close behind her, just over her shoulder. No, and afterward she wouldn't either—it was domestic science day, and domestic science was always interesting. Mama's kitchen was a very different place since this study had come into Hildegard's life.

Down Valencia Street—down Market Street to the trolley. She could walk it, if she left school promptly at three; it was a fascinating walk on a windless, foggy afternoon like this one. The shops and the shoppers were fascinating; wonderful markets displaying red meat and pearl-white fat, wonderful dresses in the big windows.

On the trolley she could think sanely, quietly. And it was all absurd, all imagination and fright. She deserved it, too. She deserved some punishment for being so—well, so bad. For that *was* being bad, even if one had been quite carried away—quite intoxicated with happiness and love and moonlight and music and a thousand soft emotions that had seemed to have nothing to do with anything like badness.

She deserved the heartache of Norman's cruelty in not writing—indeed, if he never came back, she would deserve that, too.

But not—this. No, she didn't deserve this hideous terror, nobody in the world could be bad enough to deserve this sickening suspense.

What if he never did write or come again? She could bear it. What if she *had* been a little fool, throwing her heart away upon the first man who paid her any attention? She

could live that down, too. He would be an irresistible man indeed who won her a second time!

That was fair punishment. She would accept it. Indeed, she would come to despise where once she had loved, she would come to feel for the man who had kissed so lightly, and forgotten so quickly, a contempt only a little less than that she felt for herself.

But not this other thing. No, she couldn't face that. And again, coming to it in her thoughts, she felt her heart leap like a wild thing in a snare, felt her mouth grow dry and salty, and her hands bathe themselves in cold perspiration.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, what shall I do?"

She did not say the words. Her soul framed them, the wild cry of a despair that enveloped her body and mind and soul.

CHAPTER XII

DALY CITY—South City. They were building a long fence for something—what sort of a fence was that?

Hildegarde swallowed with a dry throat. She pressed her hand against her hot and aching eyes. What had she been thinking about, what had she been afraid of, what was the matter?

It all came back in a frightful rush, like a weight of iron on heart and mind and soul.

But no, she must be crazy. Other girls had terrors like this, girls in books—girls in “trouble.”

“Oh, my God! Oh, my God,” she whispered, “but not *me!*”

The fear was burning her up, it was devouring her like a beast. She must throw it off. Spinning down into the warm, dreaming open countryside, trying to stare out of the car window interestedly, naturally, it rose, to suffocate her, and sank, and rose and sank and rose again.

She was sixteen, and this was autumn. She was going home to her father and mother after a school day. She had let herself get frightened, because—because——

Well, because she had that—that thing to remember, about last July, and moonshine, and the throb-throbbing of waltz music coming over the water, and Norman’s kisses on her mouth.

Her secret. Nobody at home knew it, nobody in the world knew it—except Norman. And perhaps that was why she had to think about it so much, whether she wanted to or not—secrets were troublesome things.

But she mustn’t let herself get frightened. The Fear would be gone in a few days, and this agony all for nothing.

Nothing had happened to her. Nothing could have happened! Not to think about it—that was the sensible thing.

Leaf fires. How sweet they made the world smell! Old men with rakes tending leaf fires. Children scuffling leaves as they loitered home from school. Her throat thick and dry again.

Fright again. Panic. Sheer, trembling terror.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Hildegarde, walking slowly up dirty, cluttered Bay Lane, would not look for the postman to-night. She wanted, she expected letters no longer. Love letters! Baubles for girls. She would never again quarrel with fate if only—if only this black, haunting cloud might pass.

Silently, efficiently, she prepared the dinner. She directed the older boys to study their lessons for to-morrow.

"Sit at the table—you don't have to muss the knives and forks—let the knives and forks alone! Push the sugar bowl back, Stew, and get your pencil. Give him his pencil, George. Go on, now, Cliff, so Pop won't be mad at you. Well, read me the first one—you only have to do one at a time—read me the first one. Isn't it better to do one than none? You only have to do one at a time. Get started, Cliff. Oh, read that out loud, Lloyd. That's a part I love—the part about Napoleon. Come over here by the stove, Stew, and Sis'll tell you as you go along."

"That meat pie smells awful good, Hilda," her mother said heavily. "Your crust is better than mine."

"I don't know." She tried to squint at it critically, tried to speak as she would have spoken at this time yesterday. "Oh, God help me, God help me!" ran her thoughts.

Patience. This would all be over soon, and then there would be something else to worry about. Patience. It might be all imagination. It *must* be.

And when it was over, oh, dear God, oh, generous God, the relief! Just to be Hilda Sessions again, poor, and neglected by her sweetheart, and burdened by the claims of a delicate mother and four exacting younger brothers. Oh, how she would make biscuit and polish china! How delicious

everything commonplace—trips to school, work, play, boxed lunches, trips home, would seem then!

There must be a way out. It couldn't be that for that one hour of madness all the glory of her pride, her energy, her intelligence should be brought down to the dust. She *was* a better daughter—a better sister—a better scholar than the neighbouring girls; surely that would mean something in her favour now; surely even the fates wouldn't wipe all that out, and leave a shameful, dark stain against her name instead?

She became an embodied prayer, thinner, graver, feverish in expiation. "O God, help me!" she breathed in school, in the streets, riding to and fro on the trolley, busy in the kitchen. "O God—*God*—help me!"

One day, trembling, pale, more beautiful in her distress than she had ever been in the careless days so long ago, she went to the office of the Alcazar Theatre.

It was surprisingly easy; no particular barriers to pass. Who was the manager, please? Mr. Weaver. Could she please see him? Certainly. A lady to see you, Mr. Weaver.

A small office, crowded by a desk, lined with the photographs of actors and actresses.

"Mr. Weaver, I'm sorry to trouble you, but I wonder if you know the address of Norman Montgomery? He played here for a few weeks last July."

Mr. Weaver, an extraordinarily kind and fatherly looking man, was studying her thoughtfully.

"Where have I seen you, my dear?" he asked, paying no attention to her question.

"Why——" She gulped, smiling a little uncertainly. "I don't know. Nowhere, I should think."

"Folks theatrical?" he asked encouragingly.

"My—my folks? No. But Mr. Montgomery left some books with me, and I don't know where to send them."

Hilda had concocted this story some days previously; she told it without a flush.

"Norman Montgomery, eh? There was an old turn, 'Cooper and Montgomery,' played the sticks for years——"

"He was their nephew!" Hilda burst forth. "He played in several parts here—juvenile leads——"

The beloved professional terms. Just saying them seemed to bring him nearer. Her cheeks flushed suddenly with hope and excitement, and her eyes shone liquidly upon middle-aged Mr. Weaver.

"I guess he's listed here." The man took a fat, paper-covered book from a shelf without leaving his swivelled chair and pushed its thickened, humped pages with a fat thumb. "I kinder remember him, but I was East all summer," he said. "So you ain't in the profession, eh?"

"No, sir," Hilda answered politely.

He was still pushing the pages, but his eyes had never left her face.

"You've got a good face for the stage," he suggested. "Had any experience—any schooling?"

"No, sir."

"Here he is," said Mr. Weaver, pointing out the words in his book. "Montgomery, Norman (William Jones), address care of Walter Montgomery, Belvedere, California."

Hilda's heart sank.

"That's the address I've had," she said, discouraged.

"You don't remember the name of the company he went out with?"

"Oh, yes." She brightened. "The Keane Kendall Company."

He stopped short again, staring at her appraisingly, genuinely struck by her beauty.

"You say the Keane Kendall crowd, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, why don't you go over to Oakland and see him for yourself?"

"Oakland!" The world was going round, turning golden.

"Right across the bay at the Marshall," Harry Weaver said, pleased to have pleased this radiant child, with her ten-drilled soft hair and great serious eyes. And he slammed the fat book shut, and looked at her triumphantly. "They're

playing a three weeks' engagement there. If you'd a-said Kendall in the beginning I'd have been able to tell you right off—here, wait a minute!”

He stretched a fat arm for his extension telephone, “Give me Oakland, nine six three, Lou,” he said into it, in a comfortable undertone. He jiggled the receiver, eyes upon Hildegard, lay back in his chair, holding the mouthpiece to his chest. “Maybe I can save you a trip,” he said. “Hello—hello, Marshall. This is Harry Weaver. Sure. Sure they did. Yes, and they won’t be in a hurry to try it again. Say—say lissen—is there a feller there named Montgomery—Norman Mont—gomery?—That’s the feller. That’s the feller. Seems Walt is his uncle. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Is that so?”

Hilda, fluttering in her seat, regarding the telephone with eyes that widened and shone like stars, saw his expression change slightly.

“Montgomery left the company weeks ago, right after they started out,” he said, watching her curiously, yet not without sympathy, as he hung up the instrument.

“Oh, I see,” Hildegard said faintly and politely. “Thank you. I see!”

“Said he left ’em the second week,” Harry Weaver added, still watching her pleasantly, curiously, sympathetically. “He’s gone East.”

“And they don’t know where he is, I suppose.” She made it a quiet statement rather than a question.

“Well, they wouldn’t, you know.” The manager stooped his full, kindly, middle-aged face and his cigar toward a lighted match, sat back in his chair, regarding her benignly. “I wouldn’t worry about a few books,” he said.

“A few——?” In the agony of her spirit, she had forgotten the book pretence entirely, and he saw she had. The colour flamed up under her clear skin.

If she could get out of this office decently, then, whatever happened, she need not be disgraced before this complete stranger, at least. She looked about, tried to study the

photographs lightly, tried to smile. But her mouth felt thick and her temples were thumping dully. Everything seemed blurred and confused.

"I'm sorry to have given you so much trouble," she said dizzily, getting to her feet.

The girl named Lou, a coarse, kind-looking girl from the telephone board in the hall, came in and gave her a glass of water, and Hildegard straightened herself up with an effort, and found water on her cheeks, too—tears and water both. Her head had been against Mr. Weaver's shoulder, and she was constrained by sheer vertigo to let it rest there another few seconds.

Then she could put her hands to her hat, and take the purse that had fallen to the floor, and that he had put on his desk, and stammer her thanks.

"Thank you so much—it was the warmth in here, I guess; it's so cold outside to-day. Thank you a thousand times."

She could not meet their concerned eyes; she could only blindly grope for her belongings, blindly stumble out into the shabby winter street. Her smiles, she knew, were glazed and unnatural—it couldn't be helped!

"What do I care *what* they think? What do I care *what* they think?" she said, almost aloud, walking rapidly down Turk Street. "I'll never see them again—I don't care what they think!"

Market Street. Geary Street. Dirty dark streets upon a winter afternoon, streets upon which people spat, and threw cigarette and cigar stubs. Shoe-polishing stands—shiny leather seats raised above the sidewalk, with folded newspapers stuck into them. Delicatessen stores, with sharp pickly odours coming out of them. Bakeries smelling of weak, sweet coffee.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!"

She took her seat on the trolley, her brows knit, her eyes darkened with pain. She must think, now, she must save herself; nobody else would save her. And there must be a way out. There must be a way out.

As quickly as love, or as what she had thought love, had

come into her heart, it went out. Love, or passion, or mere youth and curiosity and vanity, what mattered it? It was gone. Norman might have loved her, or might not—she did not care. He did not love her now, he had gone cheerfully away into the world, forgetting her, caring too little for her anguish to send her even a letter.

And she, who had read of Tess, and Hetty, and Effie Deans, who had despised them for weaknesses she could not in the least comprehend, she was of their company!

"I'm a perfectly healthy human being," Hildegard reasoned, trying to control the waves of terror that kept rising within her and shaking her to the soul. "And in ten years I'll still be alive—I'll have gotten through this somehow. But how?"

Closed trolleys now, no more riding on the outside. Sidney Penfield had not made the trip with her for some weeks; perhaps he had passed his examinations and gotten into college? His father might have influence enough even for that.

Cold, cold towns, all drawn up into themselves like huddled birds, smoke rising from chimneys into windless, heavy air. The evergreens looked as naked somehow as did the stripped orchard trees, the eucalyptus were shabby and shedding their discoloured sickles, peppers were like wilted moth-eaten plumes.

Ice on the dirty puddles in Bay Lane, nipped marguerite bushes collapsed in the gardens. Cold. Cold.

But the kitchen was warm. There was a good fire in the coal stove, and Hilda's mother was drowsing as usual in the rocker. She had a fashion paper in her hands, she was interested in rajah silk dresses.

"Look at the size of the hats, Hilda."

"Oh, for goodness' sake." Hilda ran upstairs, ran down again without her hat and heavy coat. "Did the sausages come, Mama? Did he take back that bag of spoiled cornmeal?"

She did her ordering on the way to school now, it was much the more satisfactory way. Altogether, the crazy craft of the

Sessions household was in safer waters than it had known for many, many years.

Rudy had had a serious stomach trouble, for one thing, and had been forbidden alcohol under promise of death. An attack that was strangely like a stroke had frightened him into obedience, and he was not only healthier, but less inclined to reckless games of poker and dice on Saturday nights.

And Cliff and Lloyd were big boys, able to make quite an appreciable addition to the family's gross income, with their paper and magazine routes, and errand running. The worst of Nelly's illness appeared to be over, leaving her broken and helpless—or supposedly so—but out of pain, a fat, idle, contented lump of a woman in a rocker, who could get as far as the door to pay a bill when the children were not home, and who rarely extended her activities further. After so many hard years, it was unspeakable luxury to find herself with enough to eat, and with a husband never intoxicated, and with no young baby to break her night's rest.

Hilda did most of the actual work and directed what she did not do. She sent her brothers on errands, commanded them in the matter of dish-wiping and porch sweeping. Cooking came naturally to her, and like all born cooks, she loved the art.

So their little world ran smoothly, or with comparative smoothness, and Hilda, as the dark November days slipped by, was conscious of its blessings. She loved them all, Pop, and poor Mama, and the boys, and crippled little Mabel in the distant ward of "Little Jim." She liked her problems at school, her trips to and fro, the future with its promise of usefulness and friendships and successes.

And if the dread threat of her Fear passed by, if she might again find herself just little Hilda Sessions, a favourite at school and at home, with life uncompromised before her, and her dark secret to be eternally a secret, how grateful she would be—how humble! How she would work, love, educate, and change herself to be worthy of the new destiny that was really only the old destiny, seen through clearer eyes.

November. Mid-November. Late November, with

Thanksgiving coming, and there was no change, except the gradually deepening despair in her heart. Inevitably, steadily, the hour drew near when her father and mother must share with her that moment of nausea and vertigo, that sick surprise that had come to her at the school blackboard endless weeks ago. What would they do, what would they say? Would it kill Mama? And what would become of herself?

Hilda Sessions, the tall girl with the light hair—the girl who had skipped two grades in Grammar School and one and a half in High—the girl her people thought so much of—in trouble.

She lay awake in the nights, dry-eyed, staring up at the ceiling—a discoloured ceiling, with a wavering blot of light from a street lamp pale upon it. Hating Norman and all men. Hating herself, and all ignorant, easily flattered girlhood, hating the beautifully slim body that was hers no longer.

Thanksgiving afternoon was peaceful in the warm kitchen. But it was a nipping day out of doors. To-morrow, to be sure, might be serene and balmy, and the rains of last week had actually encouraged a film of bold green to touch the dark earth here and there. To-day, however, was freezing cold, with a dark, heavy wind blowing. It was a day of which Californians said with generous pity that it was “like the East. It was always like this in winter, in the East.”

While Hilda basted the turkey, to the accompaniment of a rising tide of appetite and enthusiasm among her brothers, she could see the clothes blown horizontal on the Beyermanns' line. Just like them to wash on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Birdie Beyermann was home now; she had married somebody, even though she had a fat, white-headed little boy whose birth antedated her wedding by several years. The line was full of the little boy's clothes.

Tin cans blew with a clatter across the dump; the bay was cold steely ripples. The bare whips of the willows and the beaten mallow bushes bent in the harsh airs. Hilda's two older brothers presently went out to deliver Thanksgiving

flowers for Dardi the florist; she did not know where Stew was, but Georgie was fretting and tossing in the parlour bedroom with a touch of grippe.

"Gosh!" he kept muttering. "Now I won't have any toykey. Now I won't have any toykey. Gosh!"

They left his door open so that he could get some of the kitchen warmth; the delicious odour of the roasting fowl scented all the house.

Rudy and Nelly Sessions had lived on a ranch when first they were married, and they still had holiday dinners in the middle of the afternoon. Breakfast was a movable feast, taken hastily, with no regard for form, and week-day lunches were carried off by the whole family in boxes. But on Sundays they breakfasted heartily, and late, and dined heavily at about four o'clock.

"I hope the boys and Papa'll come in pretty soon," Nelly said, as Hilda began to mash white potatoes in the pot.

"Oh, don't worry—they'll be here! Here's Pop now. Let's hope he doesn't want to shave before dinner; he didn't shave this morning!"

Hilda turned a flushed cheek to her father's kiss, he sat down by the table. She noticed that he looked somewhat pale, and seemed worried; he had seen a possible purchaser that morning, probably no deal had been made. Thanksgiving was no time to show property, anyway, and a day like this would kill any sale!

"Hilda——" her father said. And she knew at once that all was lost.

A wild, blind impulse toward flight was born, and died. Her mouth filled with water, her heart seemed to turn liquid; she trembled a little, and stood still. Mashed potato. Mashed potato. And Georgie whining in the front bedroom: "Hilda—can't I have some toykey?"

Rudy sat at the table, his narrowed eyes upon her, his jaw hanging in a snarl. There was a silence.

"It's true, eh, is it?" the man said, in a tone of iron, after a while. But his sneering lips were shaking.

The girl's heart was beating violently with fright. She

half opened her lips, panted, gave him a quick, furtive look, and looked down again at her own hands holding the discoloured wooden masher.

"What's—what's true?" she faltered, in a whisper.

"You know what I'm talking about," Rudy said measuredly.

Nelly opened drowsy eyes wide, looked at husband and daughter intently, in the sluggish beginnings of alarm. Hilda was silent—silent. Rudy watched her with the keen eyes of an animal, and with an animal's outthrust jowl.

Presently the girl abandoned her task, untied her limp, checked gingham apron, walked to the window. Standing there, her back to the room, she shrugged faintly.

Now he would rage. Well, let him! Hilda tried to keep her attention on the Dump, with a whirl of cold ashes moving on it, when the wind blew, with the brown shoulder of a low hill rising beyond it, against a pale winter sky, and on the block-square factories with tall chimneys, and the railroad siding, lined with shabby empties, between the Dump and the hill.

Her world. And she had been fool enough to dream of satin blue waters, summer moonlight, languid flags, and the sweet scent of dry grass and tarweed, to the strains of "The Blue Danube."

"Who is it?" Rudy said, in a shaking tone. "You tell me who it is. You tell me which one of these snivelling little High School boys was smart enough to get my daughter, and I'll go kill him—or you'll marry him this afternoon!"

Hilda was silent. She did not move or glance.

"You'll tell me," her father went on, breathless, menace deepening in his voice, "and you'll tell me now. It had to be an outsider that put me wise! Fellers—talking—snickering—about my girl!"

He choked on the bitterness of it. He jerked a shoulder toward the town.

"You——" he began again, gritting his teeth, almost on a sob. "You—running off to some barn or haycock—like a cat—like what you are——"

"You be *careful*!" Hilda interrupted him, her fury rising

suddenly to match his own. She panted, facing him, her tawny head lowered, the fingers of both hands locked on her heaving breast. "You be careful!" she gasped, frightened at the sweep of her own anger. "I know what I'm doing—I'm not a baby! I'm married—that's what I am, only I didn't tell you—I didn't *dare* tell you, because I knew you'd be mad!"

"Married!" Nelly echoed, on a wail.

Rudy was silent, they were all silent, for a long half minute. Then Hilda went to the oven and knelt before it, and basted the turkey busily, absorbedly, her breast still heaving.

"Who to?" Rudy asked threateningly, incredulously, eyeing her.

"Parpa, you've got to believe her!" Nelly pleaded, frantic with fear. "Hilda, tell Parpa——"

"I won't while he acts so rough about it," Hilda protested sulkily, returning to the window. But within she was quaking. What now? How long would this hold? What next?

"You're married, hey?" Rudy asked suspiciously.

Hilda tossed her head, began to manipulate pans and spoons in the sink.

"Why didn't you tell us, Hilda?"

Silence. She picked up a dish towel.

"Answer your mother, and don't be fresh," Rudy said sharply.

"Well—I knew you and Mama'd make a fuss!"

"And who is he?"

"Tell Parpa, Hilda, don't turn your back that way!"

"He's—a boy."

"What boy, dearie? Don't rush her, Rudy. What boy, Hilda?"

"A boy you don't know."

"One of the boys at school?"

"Yep. You don't know him. A boy named—Jim Hammond."

"Jim Hammond!" Rudy said sharply. "I never heard of him."

"Well, I said you didn't."

"Hammond, huh?" Rudy muttered. "He could go to jail for this, you know. You're a minor—that's what you are. Where is he?"

"I suppose he's home with his family to-day. I don't know."

"When'd you see him last?"

"Yesterday."

"And he's going to stick by you, is he?"

"I tell you we're *married*!"

"But, dearie—children like you ain't allowed to marry! Are they, Parpa?—Just be still a minute, Rudy, and don't look like that. Who married you, Hilda? Doctor King?"

"Sure it was Doctor King."

"When?" Rudy's voice rang out like a shot. But there was already a note of relief in it.

"In—in June."

"Turn 'round and look at me. You hear me?—turn 'round and look at me. You say Doctor King married you? Where'd you get your license?"

"Hilda, you wouldn't let no Justice of the Peace marry you, dearie?" Nelly demanded, in tears.

"You're damn' lucky if anybody married her!" Rudy said harshly to his wife, with an ugly glance. "You say Doctor King married you?" he asked, turning his dark look again toward his daughter. "All right. All right. This was in June, hey? And how old is this feller you say Doctor King married you to?"

"He's—he's much older. He's—twenty."

"Oh, and in High School?"

"Not now he isn't."

"Oh, 'not now he isn't.' And you said you were fifteen, huh?"

"I said I was eighteen."

"And where'd you get your license?"

"In Redwood City."

"That's right," quavered Nelly. "Doctor King lives there, I remember that!"

Rudy, after a prolonged and shrewd study of his daughter's face, got to his feet. He came to the sink and gripped her slender shoulder with iron fingers, his weasel glance, through half-shut lids, was close to her face.

"Now, look here," he said measuredly, "I'm going up—now—to see King. There'll be no Thanksgiving dinner for *me*! I'm going *now*. I've been working hard all morning and I don't feel any too good, but that don't matter. I'll have a talk with him, and meanwhile, you get hold of this boy—what's his name?—you get *hold* of him. I want to see him. I've got something to say to him, and maybe I'll need a horse-whip to say it with. But, anyway, you get him. Do you hear?"

He took a pencil from his breast pocket, a notebook.

"You say you were married in June," he said, balancing the pencil over a blank sheet. "What date?"

"The twenty-seventh." She was cool now. Her plan was made.

"The twenty-seventh. And what's the feller's name?"

"Jim Hammond."

"Jim Hammond. Anything to do with the undertaker?" She had forgotten the undertaker.

"No. He comes from San Jose."

"San Jose, huh?" He wrote that down. "What's his job?"

"He hasn't any—yet."

"And maybe that's why they were waiting to tell you, Parpa," Nelly supplied eagerly.

"We wanted to be able to start housekeeping," Hilda confirmed it sulkily.

"All right. All right. You say you're married now, and if you are I guess it's too late to kick," Rudy said, still unsatisfied, still incredulous. He snapped his notebook shut and slipped it back into his pocket, all the time watching Hildegard closely, as if expecting that her calm self-composure might break. "You'd throw yourself away on a boy without a job——"

"Now, never mind, Parpa," Nelly interrupted the scornful

voice soothingly, "never mind. If she loves him—and he may be a wonderful feller and push right ahead——"

Rudy, struggling into his shabby coat, paused again at the sink, to which Hilda had turned her attention once more.

"And you're going to have a baby, Hilda?" he asked, in the gentlest tone he had yet used; a tone through whose regret and reproach the pride, the love of even a faulty father for his first-born daughter betrayed itself.

She nodded her tawny drooping head; her throat thickened, and the slow tears dropped upon her young, young hands, busy with the pots and knives, and wet with the furry, lukewarm water in the dishpan.

Rudy took his hat, the kitchen door closed upon a draught of cold, cold air. He was gone.

"Oh, my God, ain't that unlucky!" whimpered Nelly.

Hilda went over to her mother's rocker, and kneeled down, and put her arms about the bulky, soft figure.

"Mama, you don't think I'm bad?" she faltered.

"Oh, no, dearie," Nelly answered, shocked, and smoothing the bright hair back with a fat shapeless hand. "On'y it made Parpa mad to have you do a thing like that without asking us. Secret marriages don't never work well, Hilda, and now—here you are, you see, going to have a baby already, when you ain't fairly grown up yourself. Men have it all their own way in this world, Hilda, and once your children begin coming, it's good-bye to everything. You get old, and they get kinder sick of your complaining and fretting. We kind of hoped you'd get to be a teacher, and maybe marry some man that could fix things better for you than Parpa's ever been able to do for me, on account of my bad health and having children so fast!"

The familiar whine—whine—whine, her voice slipped into it naturally now. This was the tone Hilda heard when she came in from school in the afternoons to find a neighbouring woman visiting her mother.

"Now, you'll go get your husband, right away, won't you, Hilda? Parpa'll be awfully mad if he comes back and you

haven't done like he said. And you've got to keep Parpa quiet until he kind of gets used to the idea."

"I'll go right away." But Hilda sat back on her heels for a moment, staring about the familiar, grimy, slatternly room, that wore its best and tidiest aspect to-day, in anticipation of the holiday feast. The broken stove, propped on three iron legs and an empty kerosene can. The dingy window against which two twists of gray lace curtain hung. The oil- and dirt- and water-stained sink, with the broken alarm clock on the narrow shelf above it. The chipped floor, the nicked chairs, the table with the brown glazed Rebecca teapot.

A long minute. Then she got up and went upstairs. Nelly could hear her opening and shutting bureau drawers. But when Hilda came down her mother had fallen into one of her heavy dozes, and the girl only lightly kissed the grizzled, disordered hair for good-bye. She went into the musty front bedroom; Georgie was asleep, too, his distress over the turkey forgotten.

The kitchen door was closed behind her softly; she went, in a cool, enfolding wall of wind, through the side yard to the front door, outside of which she had quietly placed her straw collapsible case a few moments before. Then quickly, steadily, she walked past the long arm of the Dump, past the railroad siding, past the Francos' fence where the cross cow lived among the bare grape and tomato vines.

A train went by, a Los Angeles train, with little puffs of crisp smoke tossing out into the cold winter air, and warm, leisurely travellers looking out from the big chair-car windows. Hilda remembered that she had always hoped to travel some day on that train.

"I guess I will never do that now," she said mildly, almost aloud.

Wind howled over the Dump, sung in the copper telegraph wires high overhead, ruffled the cold bay. Hilda saw her third brother, Stuart, eleven years old, staggering in the face of the wind toward home.

A dirty little fellow in a grimed roll-neck sweater. His

hands were sore and red, and cold tears were on his cheeks. Who would tell him now to wash himself and comb his hair before Pop came back? Who would save him from lickings and help him with long division? Her heart ached over him suddenly in such an anguish of sympathy that for a moment she thought of turning back. They needed her, the four boys who broke things, and forgot things, and were late for meals, and hated to study, and had so strange a talent for enraging their father.

Pop would come home furious, late this afternoon, and lick somebody. But she dared not turn back. She was afraid.

"Stewy, dear, run in and get warm, and wash up for dinner. I've got to go up to town!"

"Ain't we going to have the turkey?"

"Yes, of course we are! You tell Cliff that I said you weren't to wait for Pop and me, but that he was to carve, and not to waste it, and then you boys must clean up as good as you can, and put a good big plateful in the oven for Pop. I've got to go up to town. Kiss me, dear."

He smelled of dirt and freckles and ice-cold hair and chewing-gum; he jerked himself away from this unexpected caress, in a hurry to reach the warm kitchen.

Hilda followed him with only one glance. Then she was blown away from him, a slender figure in the wind. Blown away from the tracks and the ruffled, steely sea, the bare lanes with their ice-crusts pools and wheel tracks, the beaten, nipped chrysanthemums and whipped willows, Beyermann's market, Hersey's wood yard, the empty freight cars, the railway, the crazy, staggering fences and the dirty, shabby houses—blown away by the same wind that was fanning cold ashes and rattling rusty tin cans on the Dump.

CHAPTER XIII

THE Carlsens kept a toyshop; a family affair, known to the children of two generations as "Carl's Bazaar." Mr. and Mrs. Carlsen waited upon customers and their son Fritz drove the delivery wagon. They all lived behind the shop, the wagon stood in a littered, narrow yard still farther back, the horse had a small shed in the same crowded, straw-floored, crate-heaped space, and only at Christmas time did they need any assistance in maintaining an excellent business and a contented home life.

Fritz had a bullet head, a long thin face, a long thin body, and pale blue eyes. His mental development had stopped short, with scarlet fever, at eleven, but he was strong and perfectly capable of delivering dolls' buggies and coasters. Mrs. Carlsen was gray and soft and fat and shrewd. Carl himself was a rosy little man, spectacled, and ginger-coloured, friendly, industrious, thrifty.

From December first until December twenty-sixth they usually employed an extra saleswoman; this year it was a young girl who said she was eighteen and whose name was Hilda Sessions. They paid her six dollars a week, and she had a room, up a sharp flight of stairs at the back of the store, on a sort of roof above the stable. A nice, bright, sunny, scrupulously clean room. The girl was on duty from eight in the morning to half-past ten at night, but she had plenty of time for nice hot meals of sausages and potatoes stewed with cauliflower, and coffee cake and pancakes, and she had all Sunday afternoon off. Sunday morning she was supposed to be in the shop, straightening stock after Saturday night's wild jumble of sales, and if church-going children peeped wistfully in, she was supposed to sell them china dolls or stick

licorice, even though the shop was technically observing the Sunday law.

Hilda had never had such a nice room and such regular, hot meals. The Carlsens lived well; the woman was a fine cook. The room over the stable was warm, if odorous, and flooded with sun; the bed wore a snowy cotton quilt and there was a feather pillow heavy with down.

Mr. Carlsen had a cash register; he seemed afraid at first that Hilda might steal; every sale had to be carried to him and the money put into his hand. And Mrs. Carlsen told her, good-humouredly, that she must not let Carl make love to her; he bothered all the girls making love, and they had no time for that now, in the holidays.

But these trifles passed; very shortly, Mr. Carlsen told her that she could ring up her own sales, and never by any word or glance did he indicate that he found her attractive. Perhaps they suspected the truth about her; she did not care. Perhaps they would fire her; that didn't matter either.

A sort of stupor had fallen upon her, and she lived each day for itself, sometimes even happily, almost always in a kind of animal content. The winter sun shone, cranberries and holly began to shine in the windows, the sidewalks became filled with slowly moving crowds, and she was like a creature in it, but not of it, interested but not concerned.

Carlsen's toys arrived about the fifth day of the month, the extra orders for the holidays. Bright red wagons, and horns, dolls, and dolls' beds and carriages, little tables and chairs, skates and drums and bicycles, they were banked gaily on the edge of the sidewalk, and Carl stood out there in his shirt-sleeves, checking them off on an invoice, with a fat stubby pencil, in fat stubby fingers, and with his breath puffing white upon the sunny air. The two men who had brought them in a big truck had eyes for Hilda, but Hilda never saw them. She came and went indifferently, glad always to get back into the close heat of the shop, that smelled of the dinner cooking in the kitchen behind it, and of peppermint, and tobacco, and wrapping paper, and leather lunch boxes. The sweet, warm, stodgy smell, native to little shops

the country over, and never to be disassociated in her mind from this strange, dragging month of December!

By the second week the place was always crowded, crowded with women who held purses tightly in their hands, who surged to and fro, questioning, purchasing, murmuring. That eternal murmur—murmur—murmur became a sort of undercurrent to the confused thinking that was always going on and on in Hilda's head.

The bell on the cash register kept up a steady tinkling of its own, and in the afternoons, when the early darkness shut down, two white arc lights gently sizzled and hissed and gasped drily, high up against the ceiling, between the stored dark-brown cardboard boxes. Feet on the sidewalk kept up a steady rasping, too—chip, chip, chip. The girl's dreamy thoughts would keep time to it, rustling and crisp, and punctuated by the squeak of some little red cart's tight wheels, or the sheep-like "Mama" of one of the big dolls. Fish horns, droning through the winter sunshine, the trolley's capable busy gong-gong-gong through the traffic at the corner. And sometimes when Mrs. Carlsen suddenly turned on the water faucet in the kitchen there was a long droning note from the pipes, throbbing and loud, that would blend with all the other noises in the great sea of noise that engulfed her.

Christmas Eve was wet, and the film of mud on the sidewalks was pressed into a shining honeycomb pattern by the rubbered feet of the shopping crowds. The little store smelled of wet woollens to-day, and damp umbrellas and children's rubber raincoats. Silver money, changing hands, was wet; the flimsy gray paper with which Hilda wrapped the tinsel balls and the wooden horses was wet; wet fingers marked the drums and the tin whistles.

She flew from one customer to another. All the bulky carts and coasters and bicycles had to be moved indoors to-day, and Carl and his wife and Hilda crowded their way among them as best they could. The lights spat and sizzled, women blocked her way, caught at her arm.

"I asked you to set one aside yesterday.—This one seems to be broken.—Have you the same doll in blue?—Is this

marked thirty-five or fifty-five?—Have you any more of the—— Have you any—— Have you any—— Do you happen to have any——

“Will you hurry that, please.—If you sent it, what time would it come? It’s three o’clock—four o’clock—five o’clock now.—You were to send me a message about the ‘Lotto,’ do you remember?—I’m next, I think.—Will you wait on me, please?—Will you wait on me, please?—Will you wait on me, please? . . .”

The twenty-five-cent dolls were sewed in half dozens in boxes. Their faces had been pock-marked in the furnace, the blue showed glittering beneath their cheap woolly mops of mussed hair. Their clothes were cheap, sleazy cambric. But the little girls would love them, and the little girls’ mothers looked at the pock-marked faces anxiously.

“This blonde one doesn’t seem to have such a pretty face. I wonder if you have another, with a prettier face? Would you wait on me, please?”

Hilda knelt, looked under the counter, snapped string, stretched on tiptoe to reach boxes above her head, pushed her way to and fro. About her feet string and papers and excelsior accumulated in a tide, her face burned, her hair felt fuzzy like the dolls’ hair. Bursting open a cardboard crate to rip little tin trains from packed sawdust, trying to comprehend the anxious message some woman was murmuring to her across the counter, she could still keep up a running fire of remarks.

“Pencil right there, Mrs. Carlsen. Under the paper—it was right there. There are more of those wreaths—no, not of the big size. Just the little ones. Right there in that box—we had lots of the green ones, too, this morning. I think she’ll move her eyes if you just shake her—that’s right. We had the dolly hats—I think we’re out of them. We couldn’t send anything C.O.D. now—no, ma’am. Harmonicas, Mr. Carlsen. Right there. While you’re doing that will you get down the stuffed bears?—I had to take the one out of the window. In one moment, madam. In one moment. I’ll be

right back. I think we sold the last one; that one I couldn't sell, madam, it's broken; the leg is off—yes. Was this what you wanted? They all seem to like them. The children all like them.—*Well*, what do you want Santy to bring you?—Oo—wouldn't that be lovely!—In one moment, madam. I'm busy just now. . . .”

The room was hot, and the windows beaded with steam, through which a general effect of Christmas decoration in the lighted street outside took on a peculiar, unnatural beauty. Frosted green—frosted red—frosted lights. A frosted market, with little ivory turkeys dangling, and little brilliant oranges burning like flame across the street.

And the noises again. Were they in her head, or outside it? Horns—droning, droning. Loud throbbing. But that was the faucet. Gong-gong of loaded holiday trolleys, wet laughing persons packed against each other, holding their precious packages high. Horns. Cowbells. And the sizzle-sizzle of the white, merciless lights overhead.

Hilda's head ached as if it would split. Her feet, to the ankle, were one solid ache. Her back felt bent, bent in a weak curve of pain—pain—pain. And her hands were cold.

“Mrs. Carlsen—I'm so sorry—I feel ill. I shall have to lie down, just for a few minutes.”

The parlour. Hilda was panting, clenching her fists. The door to the shop was shut, with its usual tinkle of an announcing bell, and she could hear the cash register, too. Tinkle. Rattle. Tinkle.

Seven o'clock. The shop was forgotten, it was no longer Christmas Eve, or this world, or Hilda Sessions. She was very sick—or someone was, on the lounge in Mrs. Carlsen's room. She knelt, hooping her dishevelled tawny head into the gray comforter, she fell back gasping—dying, perhaps. . . .

Oh, they knew their business—they knew their business! The young man in the white coat—how he knew his business! He looked so clean, in the Carlsens' holiday-disordered parlour. He said, “Hold on there, Lew.” And the nurse said,

"Here, you poor child, you. Here, you poor child, you."

Hilda, between paroxysms, whispered to the nurse. "Am I having convulsions?" and the nurse, holding Hilda's wet hand very tight, and supporting Hilda's shoulders as the ambulance bumped along on cobbles, through the streets, said earnestly, "Oh, no, dear. Oh, no, dear."

Agony. Agony. More lights, strange faces. She was dying.

"Better get her ready, and bring her right upstairs," a doctor said. Christmas Eve—what did doctors' families do? Husbands and fathers away on Christmas Eve!

"Don't scream so, dear," the other nurse said. Hilda's anguished eyes could only race restlessly past the kind face, Hilda's gripping fingers delayed the hands of both nurses. "Don't, dear, we're going to take you up to the surgery and put you to sleep."

Halls again. She was on a wheeled table now; the elevator boy helped bump her gently into his car. Upstairs—hot sweetish smells—white walls—how hot and white and sickening sweet it all was. . . .

"No pain now?" It was such a kind-looking man, in white cap and apron and brown rubber gloves, looking down at her, holding her hands flat against her own breast.

"Not——" Her voice was gone. From screaming, perhaps. "Not just this minute," she whispered, smiling gallantly. And suddenly her heart was beating violently with fright. "What are you going to do?" she asked, her dark, magnificent eyes wild with fear.

"Only make you comfortable," the doctor answered. "You won't know anything about it at all."

"Doctor Dudley. . . ." The nurse drew him away, put a little strainer gently on Hildegard's nose. "Breathe naturally, dear. This is just a little chloroform—you'll not taste it."

There was a glass roof to the room, with a reflection of all their white figures in it, against the dark winter sky. Hilda's figure, swathed, straight, strapped, the only motionless one. Beyond were stars, almost all blotted out now—stars—she

and Norman had stared up at them—but they had been warm, kind stars then—summer stars—throbbing close to the heads of lovers. . . .

She thought that she was falling among them, into infinite blackness, into infinite peace.

CHAPTER XIV

SHE went back to Carlsen's Bazaar on St. Valentine's Day, a singing day of blue skies and blue airs, fragrant odours of grass and violets, sunshine and still, sweet warmth.

"Hot!" said all the world, gasping. Children shed sweaters; outside seats on the cars were filled; the market opposite Carlsen's Bazaar unrolled its awning.

There was no wind. The smell of baking bread was tranquil in the air when Hildegard got off the Fillmore Street car, and walked some hundred feet, and opened the door of the Bazaar.

She was carrying her straw case; the little exertion had brought the perspiration to her forehead under the tendrils of fair hair, but it was a pleasant sort of fatigue—associated with the new, wonderful freedom of being out in the world again!

The shop bell tinkled dully; the old odour met her—a stale odour of tobacco, and coffee, and dust, and leather cases, and thread, and wrapping paper and peppermint. Mrs. Carlsen was glad to see her; her old room with its white, white spread dazzling in a shaft of westering sun was waiting, up the little flight of outside steps. Hildegard unpacked her straw case, and hung up her hat and coat, and went into the shop. And in twenty minutes it was as if she had never been anywhere else.

Pencils. Playing cards. Rubber balls. Twenty-five-cent dolls with furnace-pitted little pink faces, sleazy nightgowns with satin bows at the neck; woolly hair under which showed the bright glaze of dry glue.

All a dream. Thanksgiving Day with its cold, raw wind,

and the angry hammering of her father's voice upon her frightened senses. Christmas Eve with papers and rubbish rising about her aching, wearied feet like a tide, with horns and street-car bells gong-gong-gonging in the frosty, happy street, with feet chipping and arc lights spitting somewhere in the confused background of her thoughts, with her hot, heavy head aching—aching, and her hair fuzzy against her flushed face like a doll's hair. The ambulance clanging through the streets, and "Hilda Smith" entered on the hospital books.

She had been very ill, the agonies of the first violent seizure had faded into only a dim memory now. But the fever that followed was vivid enough; her throat stupidly, persistently sore, her mouth thick, her words fretful and feverish in spite of herself.

They had shaved her head; it was covered with a fine fuzz of baby gold now. They had been kind to her, too, in an impersonal sort of way. The nurses had never failed her in the matter of food and care. But in six long weeks of lying still she had passed through bitter hours, through darkness and sorrow they could not save her; and its result they could not cure.

Men were her enemies, she hated them and feared them only a little less than she despised and feared herself. Hidden somewhere in her soft body, beneath the curves, the dimples, the crown of young gold, there was a traitor. Hilda lived in terror, struggling only to the day when she should know that it was killed—that it was dead, that she need apprehend its soft, insidious, cruel footstep no longer.

On her first shaky trip out of the hospital she had come to see Mrs. Carlsen. And in response to her shy, diffident question as to whether they knew of a "place" for her, Mrs. Carlsen, after a long, shrewd, not unkindly study of the thin, exquisite face, the pathetic baby fuzz of hair, the quiet, ungirl-like hands, had responded that they, Carl and herself, would be glad to have Hilda back, on the old terms.

"I ain't so young, and I like I should cook more. You don't make no work, up in that room, and Papa liked you in the shop."

"I'd be glad to come," Hilda had answered faintly, smiling through unexpected tears.

"I guess you're going to let the boys alone for a while?" Lina Carlsen had suggested, with a significant glance.

The girl had not answered at once. She had raised heavy, serious blue eyes, and looked the older woman steadily in the face. The blood had crept slowly up to her cheeks, to her temples, and her throat had moved convulsively. Her cleft jaw had been shut, the flanges of her nostrils flickered steadily on deep-drawn breaths.

"I'm done with that," she had said briefly, thickly.

"Well, that's good. You've had a bad time with the fever, and you're well, and that's lucky," Lina Carlsen had said practically. "This is Friday. Could you begin Monday?"

"Monday."

That was all. The girl had gone somewhat dully out into the sunshine, glad a livelihood had been so easily procurable, yet not very glad, not very sorry, about anything. And two days later she came back to stay.

Carlsen's Bazaar carried the insipid Elsie Books, the Gipsy Books, the Little Colonel books, "Lord Fauntleroy" and "Sarah Crewe" and "Captain Polly." Hildegard read them all.

When Carl's stock was exhausted, and the unrumped jackets had been carefully restored to the unthumbed pages, she went on to other books at the Public Library. But they were always a child's books. She told the woman at the Library desk that her favourite story was "Queen Hildegard," and that she would like to be like her.

"My name is Hildegard, too," she said shyly.

The librarian had straightened glasses, looked at her sharply.

"Is that so? Well, now you've had all of those—how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Well, I *thought* so! Wouldn't you like some of Miss Carey's? Here—here's one all the girls like: 'Not Like Other

Girls.' Or here, this is a fine one: 'Queenie's Whim.' 'Uncle Max' isn't in—that's a good one, too."

"I liked 'Swiss Family Robinson.' There isn't another like that, I guess? I liked the *doing* things."

"There's—but that's too old for you. No, but you'd like some of Mrs. Whitney's stories, perhaps. Are you in school?"

A flood of colour in the beautiful sensitive face. What was this, a grown-up child, or a childish woman? Miss Field wondered.

"No, ma'am, I had to go to work. I work in Carlsen's Bazaar."

"What grade did you finish?"

"I finished High—last term."

"High School at sixteen! I think you were a pretty good scholar. But wouldn't you rather have taken up stenography or something?"

"I was going to be a teacher." What a meek, weary young voice it was, with sorrow hidden in it somewhere. "But I had a fever and I had to go to work."

"You live with your family?"

"No, ma'am. I board with Mrs. Carlsen. My folks live in the country."

"Well, perhaps someday you'll be a teacher yet!"

No answer. But as Hildegard turned away with "Only the Governess" and "Not Like Other Girls," the librarian was touched to see that the girl's eyes were full of tears.

Sometimes, on Sunday afternoons, Carl's nephew, Lars Alstrupp Carlsen, came to two-o'clock dinner. Hildegard knew his full name because he was associated with an extremely modest news weekly, the *Nordland Voice*. The girl gathered vaguely that this sheet was perused by Danes, Finns, Swedes, persons generally from north European countries where there were avalanches and fjords and cold blue waters. Part of the paper was in foreign tongues, much in English, and there was included a short lesson in English in each issue, to which the name of Lars Alstrupp Carlsen was appended.

He was a big young man, awkward and ill-dressed, with

light thick hair, light eyelashes over sea-blue eyes, an indication of blond moustaches on his upper lip, large white teeth, and a generous filming of fair hair upon hands, arms, red apple cheeks, and big ears. Lars, to his uncle's uneasiness, was a socialist; Hilda would watch him curiously as he spouted forth his half-assimilated ideas of a model industrial system.

Sometimes, after dinner on Sunday, he would monopolize the little dining table with the red-checked cloth, and the garnet glass spoon bowl with the red blisters on it, and work over the next week's English lesson. His coat off, his hair rumpled, he was an ungainly figure, chewing a frayed pencil end, and occasionally taking out a big crumpled handkerchief to wipe his wet forehead.

"Bas'ful, huh?" he would mutter, glancing up from his English lesson to the girl, as she sat in a near-by rocker, absorbed in "Jo's Boys."

"Bashful—*bashful*. Like rash, or dash, you know. Hard!"

"Bassaful."

"No, aitch. *Aitch*. Bashful." And Hilda would laugh childishly, half in despair, half in motherly contempt.

"Well, shy, then. Isn't it the same thing as shy?"

"Just about."

Back to Laurie and Dan and Nat. The room, with its antimacassars and fringed tidies and crochet-work, its lamps and pictures, its glass vase of trembling grass and decorated newspaper case, its stopped onyx clock and gilded gift books, would grow warm and drowsy in the rainy autumn afternoons. The fire of soft Coos Bay coal would chew lazily in the silences, the wooden eaves that framed the shabby, cluttered back yard would drip—drip.

Carl, at these times, usually slumbered upon the bed-lounge, a newspaper over his face. Mrs. Carlsen, in cotton gloves, decent flaring silk skirt, decent mantle with chenille fringes and beads, commonly went with her docile son to the Lutheran Chapel. The odour of roast goose, coffee, fresh-baked rolls would linger in the air.

"Why don't we stand where they come out from the—well,

take the woollen mills!" Lars would say abruptly. "Just stand there and tell those fellows: 'If you don't like it, why do you do it? If you're making him a hundred thousand profit a year, and he's paying you twelve a week for a ten-hour day, why do you *do* it? You're a hundred to one——'"

"Don't *talk* dot stuff!" Carl might protest from behind his newspaper.

"They fight fast enough for the capitalists that rush them into wars," Lars, undaunted, would begin again in a low tone, as soon as his uncle's snoring recommenced. "But they won't fight for yustice at home——"

"For what?" Hilda's eyes would be gleaming blue, her cheeks deepen into dimples. "For *what*?"

"I say they'll fight fast enough when some capitalist waves a flag and shouts about honour! Nobody stops to think then——"

"No, but you said they'd fight in wars, but not for—not for—go on, what you said before——"

"I suppose I said 'yellousy' again," he might say sulkily.

"No, but you said 'yustice'!"

"All right then, gustice."

"*Justice.*"

"Justice. But wait—you'll marry some fellow, you'll have a lot of kids, and then what? There'll be a war about money—it's always about money, and your man will have to go."

"I shan't——" The dimples were gone now, the whole girl grown still and cold. She would look haughtily at her book—"I shan't marry."

"You say that now, because one man treated you mean. But you aren't seventeen yet!"

"And what would *you* do, if a war began? You're American born, you'd have to fight."

"I could go to jail."

"And that'd be a lot braver and pleasanter than fighting, I suppose?"

"It would be braver, maybe."

"Braver! Slinking in jail instead of defending the women

and children of your own country. Oh, yes, that'd be a *lot* braver!"

His blond face red, his sea-blue eyes half hidden under sullenly lowered lids, his big mouth set, he might begin to gather together his pencils and pads.

"I don't expect a girl like you should see that."

She might glance at him furtively, wishing contemptuously that his shirt-sleeves would just once be long enough for his big arms.

"I suppose I'm not smart enough to understand?"

"Well." He would sigh, getting into his coat. Sometimes it was more like "Vell," but not when he remembered to sound the first consonant softly. "Well, I'm going to walk, and I shall go in to Harden's to-night. We have to keep going!"

Hilda had once gone with him to "Harden's," the big basement of a McAllister Street apartment house, where the struggling socialist sentiment of the city found expression.

A smoke-walled, cement-floored lair, badly lighted, crowded with shouting, noisy, dishevelled young men and a few wild-eyed girls. Propaganda to be circulated in the shape of pamphlets, old pamphlets packed on the floor in blocks, a sloe-eyed Russian girl who spoke with a fury partly real and partly assumed like a rôle, another slim girl reputedly "living with" the weazened, spectacled leader of the frenzied group; Hilda had found it distinctly shocking, confusing, and cheap, rather than in the least inspiring.

But being young, she had enjoyed the freedom of it, the easy welcome she received, the ready "Hilda," the rushing confidences of a handsome boy with wet, slick black hair, the enthusiasm and simple faith reflected in Lars's big, blond face. And their silly talk of tearing down capitalism amused her. "If dey is no rich peoples, who does poor vuns vurk for?" Mrs. Carlsen sometimes asked Lars contentedly.

"Diwide the money, Sadderday night, and by T'ursday dey is rich and poor again yust like always," Carl would add.

"And it's all so silly—rich people can do as they like, and a lot of difference it makes to *them* how many of you gather

at Harden's and yell!" Hilda would close it superbly.

Lars would look at them despairingly, rumple his fair, thick hair.

"Oh, my *Lord*! No wonder we can't do anything, with you all perfectly satisfied to be stepped on, all your lives!" he would groan. But no one paid him any attention.

Lars was just another human being in her life to Hilda. Not a young man, not a possible friend, just Lars, the Carlsens' nephew, a queer kind of talkative boy who worked on a newspaper.

No men existed, as men, for her, in these strange days when her body grew whole and strong again, and her mind rested passive, feeding upon the juvenile books of Carlsen's shelves and of the Public Library. One side of her nature, blooming too soon, and blighted instantly, appeared to be dead. She had dreamed ecstatically of young love a year ago, dreamed of marriage, she had been shaken in her tumbled unsavoury bed in her mother's home with the passion of girlhood.

But she had no dreams now, no ecstasies, no more pain. She was a working girl, making a little money, spending it on clothes, finding some days in the shop trying, some interesting, living in the jungles with Toomai and Mowgli, or in placid English lanes with Ursula and Esther, thrilled only when they were thrilled, hungry not for a life of her own, but that theirs might be happier and fuller, and longer in the telling. And at night she slept deep, dreamed innocent dreams in her clean, flat, narrow bed.

Carlsen's Bazaar presently became the field into which she generously poured all the gallantry, the energy, the love of order imbibed from Kipling, Alcott, and the epigrammatic Mrs. Whitney. Shelves were straightened, the stock rearranged. Hildegard persuaded her employer to try new lines, and laughed exultantly when she succeeded in disposing of them promptly.

She liked her rôle of efficient and impersonal manager, liked his praise. She remembered the names of the toddling children of the neighbourhood when they came in with their mothers. Carlsen's Bazaar flourished beyond all precedent,

and great harmony reigned in the little food-scented parlour behind the shop. Hildegard was raised to eight dollars a week, to ten, and felt that she was a commercial success.

On sunny Sunday afternoons Lars would often assume disgraceful and mud-stiffened garments, always hanging in readiness on the shed door, and help innocent, vague Fritz to clean the little delivery wagon. Hilda liked to idle in the back yard on these occasions, perhaps sitting upon an empty crate, perhaps feeding a carrot to the old Roman-nosed horse, a rusty white horse with lumpy joints and with enormous protruding teeth like the keys of an old piano.

Water from the hose would whistle and sputter through the wheelspokes, glinting gaily in the streaming afternoon sun. The air of the shop was heavy and chill on these autumn and winter afternoons, and smelled dank, its street windows faced north, but the back yard was a scene of great activity and brightness. Doves wheeled on the low shed roof, white clouds sailed in a blue sky and were captured in the pools from the hose; there were tipped flower pots, an old green watering can, fences, roses, a pepper tree, planks, struggling marigolds, and triumphant, glossy periwinkle.

The old horse would drop his trembling velvet bag of a nose into Hilda's pink hand, following her with gawky steps. Hildegard would step up to the lower beam of the fence, hang on it, staring at the pleasant checkerboard of neighbouring back yards, all fenced, each with its own roses, its own pepper tree.

Beyond the double row were the backs of other houses, with girls drying mops of washed hair, mothers putting babies out in coaches for naps, fathers reading Sunday newspapers in the leisure of the week's idle day. Half a block along from Hilda's row the brick walls of the bakery ran out, shutting off further views. On week days she could see the girls eating their lunches on a sort of high porch, but on Sundays the big iron shutters were closed and the place looked asleep.

A saloon was on the corner, next door to the Bazaar, on still days scenting the air with stale beer and the smell of

wet planking. It ran far back into a tangle of barns and storehouses, and had a low-roofed shed for five buggies on the side streets. It was a famous old place, once a roadhouse a good mile away from the city, and still called "One Mile Maria's." Two enormous eucalyptus trees and a broken dry fountain close to the Carlsens' fence alone remained of what, perhaps, had been a shady garden, where hoop-skirted women had walked under trees in the early days of Yerba Buena.

Maria, whoever she had been, was long dead, the place was run by two stout, moustached, pompous elderly men, always slick and magnificent, checked of suit, flamboyant of necktie, polite to the pretty yellow-headed girl next door. Hen and Marcus.

Hilda gathered, from brief friendly conversations with Hen and Marcus, that they or their parents had had an opportunity to buy every valuable piece of property in the city at one time or another for a song, and that no important business man had not, at one time or another, been their partner. Hen had given Crocker a tip on this, Marcus had been the first one to tell Stanford that. They had known members of the Spreckels, the Huntington, the Hopkins families when they hadn't a "red."

To these penniless beginners of yesterday Hen and Marcus had tossed crumbs of advice; they spoke of them by their first names. Hildegarde was mildly interested in hearing of the Penfields again.

"I used to know Sidney Penfield—he went to the same school I did. Or at least he was coached there."

"What school was that?" Hen, strutting the wet sidewalk like a big, contented turkey, chewing on a cigar, might ask.

She would wheel an "Eagle" coaster into place, wheel another against it on the edge of the curb.

"Down the Peninsula."

"Sure—that's where they live, Burlingame. B'lingum, the swells call it. Aha—I guess we'll all have to come to calling it B'lingum; have to be swell these days. Right, huh? You bet you. Oh, yes, Penfield's got a boy—I don't

know the kid. Used to know the father's father. I'll never forget the day he come 'round to see my father. 'Joe,' he says, 'what do you think of the Blue Bottle Mine?' 'Why,' my father says. . . ."

The stories were all the same, but Hildegard liked them. There was a romance in having been penniless, and having climbed from that to magnificence like the Penfields' home on the Peninsula. She would forget to listen, remembering the times she had passed the place; brick walls surrounding gardens so deep and so deeply wooded that over them one could see nothing but the plummy tops of magnificent trees, except at the great grilled gate, where a sweep of flower-framed white roadway led to distant vistas of white mansion, awnings, porches, red-brick chimneys embraced by dark ivy.

One night, attending a meeting with Lars, and listening dreamily to the ravings of an English working man, Hilda found herself suddenly pressed into service.

"Everyone of you knows that I never had a word of recognition," the speaker was shouting. "I wrote to the leaders and asked them at least to pay my board bill and let me get out of the place. I don't know whether they answered or not! And now this fellow—who has sacrificed nothing—for if he's done anything I'd like to know what—we don't get the newspapers in jail——"

A whiskered, ginger-coloured man, perspiring, wiping with a big coloured handkerchief the thick, ropy neck the soft shirt left free, was pacing the platform like a caged animal, above the heads of the gathering and the slowly mounting scarfs of blue smoke.

"Hildegard!" It was a short-haired Russian girl at her elbow. "Carlsen wants you to go with him—he's got to have a woman along."

Hildegard answered the confidential whisper alertly. It was good to respond to friendliness with friendliness, to feel that one was of use. Gathering hat and wrap, she stumbled out of the meeting in the smoke-scented gloom, and

found Lars deep in the usual interminable conversation at the door. His companions were exactly true to type, too, dirty, eager, young, dishevelled of head.

Lars nodded briefly to Hilda, and she was a little impressed with the fact that he was too much absorbed even to smile.

"Come on," he said shortly. "We have to go out to Kentucky Street."

He strode ahead, the girl accompanied him as briskly as she could. Lars was making notes on some sort of dodger or pamphlet during the street-car ride, and paid her small attention. But the girl's insatiable appetite for new sights and scenes found material even among the scattered factories and sheds, slaughter houses and packing plants of the dreary region into which they presently penetrated.

The streets were mere rambling gutters here, crazy houses stood at all angles, lights picked out wide puddles and muddy wheel ruts under the bright early January moon.

Lars caught her arm in a mighty grip; the man was a giant, he could have carried her wholly, instead of only partially, over these wretched crossings.

"They get rents for these places!" he stated drily, indicating the miserable habitations all about. "This particular section belongs to your friend Penfield."

"He isn't my friend. I happened to say once that I knew the boy!"

"Well, he gets good rents here."

"How do you happen to know that?" the girl asked resentfully.

"Because we have looked up some of these owners—these fine gentlemen with homes down the Peninsula."

"What's the trouble to-night?"

"An eviction. A widow. Her husband worked eight years for the rich men—he was killed last month, on a Sunday—so she has no claim. They say he was not expected to go back on Sunday—she says he couldn't get through his work otherwise. I don't know. He was a slow fellow, a Pole. But, anyway, she's been turned out."

Hilda's heart began to beat fast with fear; fear of seeing suffering and injustice. If these things must be, why need she see them!

Anni—that was the woman's name—was no such frightful sight, after all. She had left her own house that afternoon, she was waiting, coated and shawled, in the dark hallway of an odorous apartment house, her two children with her. A girl of four. A lumpy little sodden girl of two. And there was shortly to be a third child.

She was a serene young woman, patient and silent. Two enormous bundles, tied in sheets, represented the more movable portion of her worldly goods. She looked at Lars confidently, expectantly.

Anni did not want to go to the City and County Hospital because it was a government institution, and her man had always been a rebel against patronage and charity. It was Hilda's task to reconcile her. After a brief exchange of words between Lars and the woman in her own tongue, the girl sat beside her, and addressed her persuasively.

"I was there. They were very good to me."

"You ain't was sick?"

"Very sick. Fever. See." Hilda took off her hat. Anni stared wonderingly at the golden cap of rich curls. Hilda gave the intently watching Lars a smiling, indulgent look. Her heart fluttered suddenly, she did not know why, at his grave answering look. "Of *course* you don't want to go to the hospital," Hilda coaxed. "But you must think of your baby. He must have a chance, you mustn't punish *him* because the world is unfair!"

"She belong the Party?" Anni asked, looking at Lars.

He gave Hildegard a fleeting look, hesitated imperceptibly.

"Yes—she's sound!" he said then, smiling.

Anni sat scowling, pondering, and Hildegard's heart ached with sympathy in a struggle she could so little understand. What did it all matter? It was only the rich who could afford to live up to their principles.

"I go!" Anni announced suddenly. And rising, she kissed

Hilda full on the mouth, and burst into tears. Her breath was strong of garlic, she was only a Polack, ignorant, unwashed, bundled in thick dirty clothing, yet something within the girl softened to absolute ecstasy at the kiss, and as she followed Lars and Anni into the street, her very soul was singing.

Lars grasped both ungainly bundles, Hildegard carried the smaller child, Anni led the elder.

They walked through the puddles and over the rough planks under the solemnly winking stars. Cool air washed their faces, sweet as wine after the fetid odours of the crowded apartment house. It was all like a strange play to Hilda.

The babies and the bundles were left at a neighbouring shanty. Beyond the opened door red lamplight showed a woman's thin face, a man's burning eyes in a tangle of hair. Lars took some money from his pocket, but Hildegard knew it was not money that put that deep look of concern and tender brooding into the woman's face as she gently took the sleeping baby, and that the bearded man who began at once to undress the weary older child was no amateur in the handling of children.

She and Lars and Anni went to the hospital; to the familiar clean atmosphere of chemical smells and whiteness and crisp feet. It was Hilda who helped Anni fill out her application blank, Hilda who explained things to the nurse.

Then she and Lars were walking to the car again, silent with weariness and their own thoughts.

"You were wise to show her your hair!" Lars said abruptly, just before they got home.

"Well, this kind of thing is interesting, it *accomplishes* something!" Hildegard answered, encouraged. "All that talk, that fighting and smoking, that crazy English striker yelling about not getting enough recognition from the Party—what good does that do? But this—really helping a woman, really *doing* something, is worth the whole lot of it!"

"Oh, that's your idea?" Lars asked freezingly. And she noted, to her surprise, and with a little chagrin, that he was angry. "That you women can think that way is one reason

they *can* turn a man's widow out into the street," he said gloomily. "What did we do for poor Marenski's woman that all the charities haven't been doing for two thousand years—board for the kids, a place to have her baby? But what about the principles back of it—what about Penfield's babies? Nobody in the world could turn *them* out, and why? Because fellows like Marenski. . . ."

There was a lot of it. She knew it all. She yawned rudely, smilingly, up at the black night sky and the powdered stars. Presently she laughed, walking briskly beside him.

"You should laugh!" he said approvingly. "That the working man is the poor man—the idle man rich. That's true everywhere, isn't it? The *working* man poor, the *idle* man rich. If a man came down from Mars, wouldn't he say, 'You mean the *idle* man poor, the——'?"

"I know all about that man from Mars. I laughed because you said that capitalists could yuggle with prices!"

"Juggle, then," he amended instantly, with his disarming simplicity. And Hildegard had the grace to feel just a little ashamed of herself.

CHAPTER XV

HELLO!"

It was said in a tone of purest delight, by a small, smart young woman who caught eagerly at Hilda's hands.

Hildegarde, coming out of a down-town drugstore, where she had been buying a new toothbrush, looked bewilderedly at the speaker for a moment, before she said, surprisedly, uncertainly:

"Pidgy! Miss Warner."

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, call me Pidgy!" the other girl said affectionately. "Well, *say*," she added, drawing off to study Hildegarde with wide-open eyes, "how *are* you? How's it happen I've never seen you?"

"Didn't you go away?"

"Well, I did, to New York, but I've been back over a year. Playing at the Central—I'll get you tickets any time," said Pidgy.

So friendly—so informal—so infinitely heartening! Hilda had been hungering for companionship; she reached for it eagerly. Her blue eyes devoured the other girl's radiant, self-confident face, her tones almost trembled in their anxiety to express all the pleasure she felt in this chance encounter.

Had she ever felt this girl a rival, an enemy? She could have knelt at her feet now; she blushed at the memory of that childish hatred of more than three years ago.

Pidgy was going to a rehearsal of "The Bowery After Dark." The two girls walked along Grant Avenue and up Market Street together.

And suddenly, to Hildegarde, the world was made new. The town, bustling in autumn dusk, the shops, beginning to light their lights, the crowds, the odours, the scent of vio-

lets and of baking bread and roasting peanuts, seemed, in some strange and mystical way, to belong to her, and she to them. Youth sang and danced in her veins again. She was alive. Alive like the men going into hotels, and the women taking heavy babies home, and the boys who were yelling and running with newspapers.

She sat in the gaunt depths of the theatre, thrilled to her toes, and watched the rehearsal. To herself she seemed to have stepped through some dark veil into a world of ease and romance and beauty.

Pidgy, of course, was on the stage. But there were several groups of men scattered in the darkness of the orchestra seats; one or two who delayed the progress of the rehearsal with shouted directions or instructions, a newspaper man getting a story in an undertone, a camera man setting off flashlights with great swoops of blinding white. Hildegard trembled, at first, for fear that some one of them would eject her summarily from this place of enchantment, but nobody paid any attention to her at all.

The high, affected voices of the players, and their casual comments in natural undertones that interspersed the set lines, made an odd effect. Their everyday street costumes were confusing, too. Hildegard had watched and listened for some moments before she realized that one of the characters was supposed to be a Chinese.

Draughty, bleak, smelling of plush seats and dust and dampness, yet what a fascinating thing a theatre was! Her first, her most absorbing emotion, among all those that possessed her, was sheer envy of anybody—everybody who had anything to do with it. They lived the real life, and all the rest of the world were outsiders, cheated of the fullness of joy.

Oh, to be just the maid who appeared for a moment in the first act, to be one of that score of idlers who gave colour to the Bowery group! Hilda fairly ached with passionate interest in every one of them.

She trembled again when the rehearsal was over. She must go back to Carlsen's Bazaar now, to an evening on the

familiar street, scented with mashed potato and scalloped onions. Hildegarde came to herself with a start, she went out, beside Pidgy, to the street, in a dazed state, quiet and bewildered.

"Come on and have supper with me and Mama," said Pidgy then.

"Oh, I couldn't—it'd be an imposition—I oughtn't——"

"For heaven's sakes, come on!" Pidgy said impatiently. And Hildegarde, walking in fairyland, went with her.

They went to a small, stuffy-smelling flat on Turk Street from whose warm gloom Mrs. Warner's protest met them sleepily, even before the lights were lighted.

"Pidgy! My gracious, I must of fell off!"

"My land," Pidgy, groping for the switch, muttered without resentment, "you'd think you could get enough sleep mornings!"

The lights revealed a sitting room, warm with velvet, plush, velours, chenille, rich with fringes and cushions and embroideries. The small lamps, hand-painted, were all red, and glowed like rubies among large theatrical portraits in satin frames. The place was crowded with furniture, an upright piano included, and in comfortable disorder.

On a littered couch, amid slippers, satin wraps, pillows, magazines, with a box of candy and a silver-handled manicure set close to her hand, lay Mrs. Warner, drowsy, scarlet-faced, and tousled of hair. She sat up, blinking and yawning, to welcome Hildegarde with a real motherly kiss, and as a banjo and some music slid from her feet to the floor, began to pin up her disordered hair and display signs of immediate activity.

"I thought maybe we'd have supper right here, Pidge."

"My gawd, Mama," Pidgy, who had dropped into a chair, pushed her hat back, and set her feet apart, said despairingly, "it's after six."

"Well, that's why I thought we'd have supper here!" Mrs. Warner repeated, with an air of cheerful capability.

"I'm dead!" Pidgy said thickly and sulkily. "You've got nothing to do," she went on aggrievedly, "but have your-

self dressed to go some decent place when I come in!"

"I know, dearie," Mrs. Warner murmured apologetically. She was hurrying from the room now, a door slammed, Hildegard heard drawers jerked open in the next room, heard water running.

"She'll do that night after night," said Pidgy resignedly. "Shall we wait for her, or you and me run out to the delicatessen, and eat here? I'm dog tired. Let's do that!" And at Hilda's submissive breathless acceptance of this plan, Pidgy called reassuringly, "Don't dress, Ma. We'll get something!"

So they dined in the crowded room with the red lights, and to Hildegard it was one of the happiest meals she had ever eaten in her life. Why were they so nice to her? What had happened?

She did not know. She only knew that a few hours before, in a grimy autumn afternoon, she had left Carlsen's Bazaar for her alternate weekly half-holiday, had walked down-town to kill time, had seen a dentist, had loitered by Sutter and Kearney Street windows, and had finally entered the Owl for a toothbrush.

Life had seemed then exactly what it had been for two whole years, amusing enough without being exciting; her job and herself had seemed manageable if not thrilling. Hilda had looked at exquisite evening gowns in windows without any sense of personal desire; just so might she have looked at stars in the sky. She had mentally gasped at the prices; twenty-five dollars for one hat, sixteen for that bag!

Neckwear had held her with a more immediate claim. Extremely nice frills for fifty cents; next week she would wear a new frill. Mrs. Carlsen had made her her plain frock of dark blue serge; it was not unbecoming, and her coat was more than a year old; the round hat was more than a year old, too, but the pompon on it was new, and Hilda had been pleasantly conscious of it as she walked along.

But now, as she ate scrambled eggs and rye bread and jam and cream cheese with the hospitable Warners, all her old values seemed suddenly to be changing, to be dissolving and

shifting. And a great weakening and softening of her whole spirit accompanied this first taste of young friendship after so many hungry months.

Mrs. Warner, evidently penitent, had done her best with the table, had made coffee, and had placated Pidgy with the warmth of her welcome to Pidgy's guest. Two young men, Thespians both, came in after the meal, and the talk became theatrical. Hilda listened, enthralled.

"Come on and take a ride, girls!" said one of the young men. "It's hot—out."

"Got the top down?" Pidgy asked doubtfully.

"Sure."

"Want to, Hilda?" Pidgy asked.

Want to what? Pidgy wasn't asking her if she wanted to ride in an automobile, surely?

"I never did," Hilda admitted, suddenly rosy.

They all looked at her. Then the man who evidently owned the car said briefly:

"Come on, then."

"Lissen, no gettin' out at any place whatsoever," Mrs. Warner said firmly.

"We're just going to run out to the beach and back," said Pidgy in indulgent, patient protest. "Come along with us if you want to, Mama!"

"No, I don't want to," Mrs. Warner answered, "but I don't want you kids out there at the Cliff House half the night!"

"Mrs. Warner," said the other man, called Toby, fair, young, and nice-looking, "you sound like our intentions weren't all they should be."

There was laughter which deepened to joyous shouts when the older woman remarked contemptuously:

"It'll be a long time before you fellers will have money enough to have anything but honourable intentions, believe me!"

Presently they were walking to the garage, Hildegard with the man named Toby, Pidgy ahead with the car owner, Frank. Everyone was giggling, young. The sky was a soft

dove-gray, the stars were shining, the night was alive with lights and voices and the sound of walking feet.

Hildegarde found herself seated in the open tonneau of a small car; she could hardly believe her senses. They moved; they were rolling smoothly out Bush Street—on, on, on, past the cemeteries and the big dark stretch of the park. They were out on the cliffs above the beach; the shining Pacific lay a dull level of molten silver, breathing, heaving softly up and down, in the starshine.

The Cliff House, silhouetted in black against the gray sky, gushed light from every window; seals were barking, the waves fell in even crashes, spread in black lace on silver sands.

Toby, her companion, had laid his arm along the back of the seat, not touching her, but near enough to feel friendly. His glittering dark boy's eyes were close to her own.

"Hildegarde, huh? That's a pretty name."

"I'm glad you like it. What's yours, really? Not Toby?"

"No, Lawrence. Lawrence Tomlinson. I don't know why they've always called me Toby."

"Lawrence is a beautiful name," Hildegarde commented.

"I guess you aren't at Pidgy's much," Mr. Lawrence Tomlinson stated rather than asked, with a bashful and daring laugh.

"No, I haven't seen her for three years."

"She's nice, isn't she?"

"She's wonderful. Are—are you a Californian, Mr. Tomlinson?"

"My folks live in Chico."

"Oh, really!" Her eyes sparkled in the soft darkness. It seemed to make him more human, to bring him nearer, somehow, that his people were small-town folk, like her own. "My family lives down on the Peninsula," she confided in return. "But—but how, then," Hildegarde asked, in genuine curiosity, "did you ever get on the stage?"

"Oh, it's easy enough, if you want to. You just put your name down at the agencies and wait."

"But according to *that*," Hilda pursued, puzzled, "wouldn't everyone go on?"

Lawrence, in turn, gave her a slightly puzzled look.

"Oh, I don't think so, do you? Do you suppose everybody wants to act?"

Hildegarde only laughed in answer. But her pulses were racing. Anything seemed possible to-night.

"But you don't suppose *I*——" she began, and stopped, choking.

"Haven't you ever been on the stage?" Toby asked.

"I?" She loved the question, glowed under it. "Why, no! I work in a toy store 'way up-town."

To this he returned a simple "Why?" and a frowning stare, bending forward to see her face.

"Why do I? Well, for bread and butter, I suppose."

"Well," Toby assured her, "you could go on the stage all right! I think you're one of the—prettiest girls—you'll think this is taffy, but I mean it!—I think you're one of the *prettiest* girls I ever saw." He stopped, overcome.

"Oh, you don't!" Hildegarde said.

"Sure I do." Toby repeated it gallantly.

The girl was silent, her brain in a whirl, her heart singing.

"And I want to tell you something," Toby presently went on, "if you want to try it, you get Pidgy Warner to help you! She's a sport, she has a lot of fun, but straight—she's the straightest girl in the profession! Her mother looks out for her, and that's one reason all the boys like her. You get her to get you something to do. . . ."

That night, when the girls had lain wakeful for an hour, talking, talking, talking, Pidgy suddenly developed a plan.

"I don't suppose you'd help old Mrs. Casey, at the Tivoli—the costume woman, just to start, Hilda? You'd have a lot better chance than you have now!"

"Pidgy, I'd do anything!" Hildegarde's young voice rang with eager fervour in the little dark bedroom.

Silence. Then Pidgy said affectionately:

"You're an awfully good sport, Hilda! Lots of girls want to take a course in acting first, and then get leads. And the

course costs about two hundred dollars, board and all."

"Maybe I could take that later," Hildegard suggested eagerly.

"Lissen, it's nonsense. I never studied anything, and I'm getting my little fifty a week, year out and year in," Pidgy said loftily.

"Oh, Pidgy, you're not!"

"Well, I say I am."

Hildegard raised herself on an elbow, studied her friend affectionately.

"I think you're wonderful, Pidgy," she said reverently.

"Well," Pidgy began modestly, "I wish I had a dollar for all the friends I've stood by, I know that. And will they knife me when they get a chance! Money, chances, working myself to death to get them jobs—and then they're done with you!"

This seemed to give Hildegard the opening for which she had been waiting all afternoon, all evening. With a fast-beating heart, but in a voice as casual as she could make it, she asked:

"Pidgy—you remember Norman Montgomery? Do you—have you ever heard what he's doing—what's become of him?"

"Handsome sort of kid, but he was an awful flirt," Pidgy answered on a long yawn. "Nope, I've never seen him since that day. I didn't like him much, did you?"

"I just happened to think of him," Hildegard said faintly. And she did not move or speak again until Pidgy's deep breathing announced that she had fallen asleep.

But Hildegard lay awake for a long, long time, stretched on her back, her arms locked behind her head, her slim figure blotched with patches of light from the reflected surfaces in the room, and with blots of shadow.

The window into Turk Street was open, the draggled sash curtain trailed gently back and forth on the sooty sill, and light swelled and sank mysteriously upon the ceiling. A stuffy little room, scented with the strong, mottled soap on the washstand and with the thick morbid odours of powders

and cologne and dust and unaired fabrics. An immense doll stood on the bureau, her poke bonnet flaring about her insipid pink cheeks, her eyelashes sticking straight out like black pins, her thick, rich brown curls pressing upon each other. Hilda, even in this dim, irregular light, could see her sashed back reflected in the mirror.

Cable cars hammered by, wheels rattled, now and then voices rose in laughter or dispute above the general deep murmur of the midnight streets. Once Hildegard heard the familiar laughter of a drunk, "Thas aw right—thas aw right—here, where y' goin'?"

Gradually all noises disappeared, and silence held the world. The oblongs and angles of light on the ceiling changed position, lessened. The occasional passing of a car sent fresh flashes glittering through the room; then there would be a moment almost of blackness.

Hildegard was praying. She hardly knew it, she had never been taught any form of prayer. But surging up from her starved and disillusioned and bewildered heart, a very stream of petition was rising.

"Oh, God, if I could once get into it—this sort of work, where they have so much fun, where everyone is so friendly! I'd work—I'd do anything—I'd never get tired or discouraged—if I was just with the people who are doing what I like to do! Oh, God, make this Mrs. Casey want to give me a job!

"I'll never look at a man again, I'm done with that. Never! But all I want is a chance to make good, to earn my own living, to have some friends.

"I'll study, I'll make them like me, I'll succeed"

The blue eyes glinted in the darkness, Hildegard's cleft chin rose as she shut her lips, her breast heaved upon a sudden tearing sigh.

"And some day," she said to herself, deep in her soul, "some day I'll meet him again—I'll meet him again! It may be in five years, or ten, or fifteen. But he'll crawl to my feet, and he'll beg me—he'll beg me!—to forgive him. And I'll never forgive him, never—not as long as I live!"

CHAPTER XVI

A WEEK later she took up her abode with the Warners, and began a life full of the rich and deep satisfaction only possible to such an age, and such a heart, as hers.

Unsparringly, eagerly, reverently, she flung herself into the life of the soiled and petty theatrical quarter of the city, and by her ecstasies and enthusiasms transformed every part she touched into beauty and significance.

Pidgy she repaid with a devotion that occasionally almost shamed the older girl's somewhat shallow and impressionable nature. Pidgy's gesture of friendship toward Hildegarde had been a thing of the moment, she had been going to a rehearsal, she had not been unwilling to impress this outsider with her importance. And afterward, it had occurred to her that nothing especial had been planned for the evening; Hilda Sessions might just as well stay, if she liked.

Now she found herself elevated to a pedestal, adored and considered and served with all the ardour of a forceful and rich personality. Immediately, everyone in Pidgy's circle was "crazy" about Hilda Sessions; it was only Hilda who appeared to believe Pidgy the sole attraction. She quoted her friend, she praised her, she was humble and attentive in her presence, she flushed with the joy of a child when Pidgy gave her any evidence of affection in return.

The two girls became inseparable. Pidgy's innate complacency saved her from any jealousy; she had plenty of beaux, she was always first in her own thoughts. And long before Hildegarde had altered in the least degree the lavish idolatry of her younger-sister attitude, Pidgy had conceded what had been generally discovered by the drifting circle that was about her: that Hilda was rare material, and that they might look for no common destiny in her case.

Hildegarde never suspected it. She knew that they liked her, praised her, kept her busy. She gave—gave—gave unstintingly. Mrs. Warner took her to her heart; they two breakfasted together while Pidgy got her long mornings of sleep, and the day came when even Pidgy admitted that Mama thought more of Hilda than she ever had of any one—except perhaps Pidgy's self. Old Mother Casey, august mistress of the robes at the Tivoli, where a change of opera occurred every week, found in her new assistant the ideal listener for whom she had waited for years.

The job of assistant keeper of the Tivoli wardrobes demanded Hildegarde's presence at the theatre in the mornings at ten. In the afternoon, between four and seven, she was usually free. But at seven she must go back, to see that the morning's arrangements for costumes had not miscarried, and to remain usually until the last act had commenced.

For months a feverish fear of being dispossessed haunted her. She drank in the miracle as if she would never slake her thirst. The brilliance of the tawdry scenes, the romance of the petty personalities held for all that happy time their glamour for her; the current theatrical chatter and gossip absorbed her interest.

It was a world gilded by the eyes of youth. Hildegarde came to know every cheap restaurant in the district, all the delicacy stores and candy shops, the costumers and milliners. She pored over theatrical weeklies; thrilled over the stage celebrities that every week brought to the Columbia and the California theatres, straight from Broadway successes.

Just to see them, to know something about them, to slip into "paper" seats, at the back of the houses, and study them at first hand, was delight. Just to feel one's self free of managers' offices, a familiar figure at all the theatres, just to know that one belonged, filled her life to the brim with satisfaction and zest.

She worked furiously; she did anything. Sometimes she scribbled lines hastily for the newspapers, sometimes in an emergency she acted as maid to some singer; the crowd told her in affectionate contempt that she was "easy," and she

laughed joyfully. Of course she was easy! Who wouldn't be, getting everything she wanted out of life?

She and Mother Casey toiled all morning long in a big nondescript workroom back of the Tivoli Opera House. It had three sun-flooded, stark windows through which a gush of light poured upon the littered table, the sewing machine, and the long ranks of clothes hung neatly on the walls. Outside the windows were grimy down-town back yards, the back yards of the hair shop and a restaurant and an apartment house; smoked brick walls, vistas toward Taylor Street, and a great sweep of clean, high sky that was almost always blue.

Sometimes the fog blundered softly in among the grimed buildings, and the lights had to be lighted in the workshop. Sometimes summer sunshine streamed in too boldly, and Mother Casey would mount a chair, and stretch a Mephistopheles costume across the uncurtained glass, or block it with the striped awning that was used in "The Pirates of Penzance."

At noon, Hilda had a sandwich in a paper bag, or rushed out for a cup of cocoa or a soda. Mother Casey mooned about, blinking, losing her glasses, telling great tales of actors and plays of long ago; and in the early afternoon the chorus girls came in to be fitted, gossiping affectionately with Hilda as they turned and preened. Sometimes the principals came in, and Hildegard treated them very respectfully—Gracie Plaisted, Anna Lichter, Tilly Sallinger. What it must be to be a star!

When the costumes for the evening's performance had been mended and checked and folded and brushed, they were laid in order upon the long table, everything else was put away, and Jim, a pock-marked old Chinese, came in to sweep. Then Hildegard and Mother Casey parted; the girl going three times a week to the dramatic school a few blocks away, and on other afternoons drifting about with some friend, or returning to the Public Library, whose use made her slightly a stranger to the other women she knew.

Often she went home, to lie reading and drowsing on the

couch, gossiping with Mrs. Warner. Sometimes she merely wandered: into Morosco's to see the last act of a melodrama, into the Orpheum, or into some manager's office with a girl who wanted a job, or had a contract to sign.

Dinner must be early; a score of her intimates usually went to Moretti's, where the soup in itself was a meal, and where a four-course dinner, including chicken, cost forty cents. Sour French bread, very crisp as to crust, very spongy as to content; thick glasses filled with lukewarm water; cream-white spaghetti over which the dark rich sauce trickled brown; wine, chicken, potatoes, lettuce limp and salt, ice cream, thick black coffee, all these Moretti put before his patrons nightly, and when any one had a nickel to drop in the piano, a furious, hammering wave of music was thrown in.

And the company! The laughter, the chatter, the quarrels watched so interestedly by outsiders, the passionate undertones in which partisans were made. Girls furious with managers, girls complacent over new acts, men discussing the New York situation, old actors and old actresses, elegant and superior and brimful of the tales of old triumphs.

Newcomers were pointed out. "That's Radcliff, he's at the Orpheum. Look—don't look now, that's that woman who has the seals. That's Baby Tuesday—isn't she cute?"

Much love-making naturally went on as the red wine circulated. Hildegard could not but come to understand it, as these young professionals did. She knew presently that some of the girls were not straight; indeed, they were glad enough to tell her all about it and to cry over the cruelties of love.

But she herself kept her own counsel, and by that strange mystery that is a girl's heart, was always the onlooker, always the listener. Only a very unattractive girl or one of extraordinary charm might have assumed this attitude; Hildegard quite unconsciously took advantage of her privileges on the latter count, and was considered far above the aspirations of these self-absorbed boys, whose loves came and went as readily as their incomes did.

They adored her; they wanted to sit next to her at the

table, to murmur into the curve of ear that the rich masses of gold hair framed so beautifully, to see the colour and the dimples play in the exquisite face, and to win an occasionally full, amused look from the magnificent, heavy-lidded blue eyes.

But she would play with them, and no more. Her real emotion was saved for the return to the theatre, for the thrill that never failed her when she went up the dirty, planked alley to the stage door, when she slipped through the excitement in the wings and entered the teeming big room where the chorus dressed.

Pins, powder, hooks, strings. Girls muttering, laughing, wheeling about in a whirlpool of silk-clad legs and fluffy heads.

"Hilda—see if I'm caught.—Hilda, look—did I split that darned sleeve?—Hook me, darling, will you?—Hilda, this isn't the one I had last night. . . ."

Hildegarde, her heart singing a pæan of joy, would fly from one to the other; she would laugh, sympathize, encourage. They were all important in her eyes. She never could understand their taking their profession lightly, their casual marriages, their occasional "I'm going to give up the stage!"

To her they were never mere working girls, who had selected the least satisfying and the dingiest of occupations. They were semi-goddesses—they were among the few fortunate persons in the world!

"You don't like the boys to get fresh, do you, Hilda?" Pidgy would sometimes say wonderingly.

"Well—nothing in it, you know. Either they want to marry you—or they don't," Hilda answered, with unusual explicitness, one idle Sunday morning.

It was March; Hildegarde was nineteen. She and Pidgy were taking the holiday lazily, as they loved to do; Pidgy at the cluttered bureau, busy with pads, buffers, creams, scissors, and her own pudgy little hands, Hildegarde lying in bed, both pillows under her head, her slim body stretched luxuriously straight and flat under the light covering, her

gold hair loosened in a cloud about her thoughtful face, her blue eyes still dewy and dark with dreams.

Outside the window the Sunday morning was blue and dreaming, too. It was almost noon, but there was small stir in the grimy street. A few wrapped and coated women had slipped in and out of the delicacy store; a few picnickers had chipped their way to the corner and boarded the cable car. And across the street, the slim, pimpled boy at the saloon was washing the sidewalk with a swishing noise from the hose.

Mellow sunlight had crept in among the shops and hotels and apartment houses; it lay in blocks and angles upon the almost deserted pavements; boys at the corner squabbled shrilly over the distribution of the great stacks of dull pink and blue newspapers, and were still.

Pidgy wore a soggy rag of lace-trimmed pink silk as a nightgown and had superimposed upon it a soggy silk rag of a kimono. She swept about the room in leisurely fashion, rubbing a tinted tonic into her hair, buffing her murderously bright nails, inspecting her face at close range, yawning. The floor and bed were a drift of newspaper sheets; from the dramatic sections, especially, the girls had drained every particle of intelligence. Upon a chair stood their breakfast tray, demolished and cooling now. Mrs. Warner loved to bring it in, and sit gossiping with them, late in the morning of their free day; the telephone would tingle, a box of flowers might arrive, or some other girl of their own age and their own type come in for another half-cup of coffee and an animated discussion of the latest failure or success of this acquaintance or that.

Pidgy, on this particular morning, answered Hildegard's sophisticated summary of the situation with a shrewd glance before she said doubtfully:

"But, Hilda—look here. Here's how it is: you've got to marry, you know."

"I haven't got to marry one of these boys from the Tivoli or the Alcazar or the Central," Hildegard submitted, after thought.

"No. But you don't want to be an old maid," Pidgy argued.

Hildegarde smiled at the discoloured ceiling, half shut her long-lashed eyes.

"I don't know," she said slowly.

"Oh, heavens, I wouldn't be an old maid if you made me the greatest actress in the world!" Pidgy said, with fervour.

Hildegarde sent her a level glance.

"No, I don't believe you would, Pidge," she conceded. And after a pause, as if half to herself, she added: "But *I* would."

"I'll marry," the other girl said, with the same faint, uneasy accent on the pronoun. "I'll go on with my profession, of course. But I'll marry!"

"And I'll succeed!" Hildegarde said, in her heart.

For as she looked about her, and saw girls who did, in a greater or lesser degree, succeed, girls who were presented with contracts, and entrusted with important parts, she knew that the secret was only patience and perseverance. She need only wait.

Girls who were vain, lazy, stupid. Girls who were ungrammatical, dirty, ignorant. Girls who flirted, and girls who did more than flirt. Girls who drank too much, and got silly. Girls who were only half in earnest, girls who were bold and unscrupulous.

And to them all came success, if only in a measure and for a time. What sort of success, this particular girl dreamed, might come to one who held herself steadily and faithfully to her work, who looked neither to left nor right, who knew neither arrogance nor fatigue nor discouragement, ill-temper nor pride nor jealous smallness?

She lived only for the dream. Her beauty, her friendships, her new knowledge of dressing and grooming herself tended only to that, to the day when she should face Norman Montgomery again, glorious and superb and powerful, and crush him under her foot as he had crushed her.

And meanwhile, it was a joy to work, to climb, to know herself admired and watched as a creature of strangely

potent stuff, as something whose mettle even this drifting, happy-go-lucky crowd of egotistical optimists recognized and respected. Under the river of the city's life their microscopic problems, failures, and successes ran through the most sordid and the muddiest of streets. Their triumphs were only those of sawdust and tinsel, after all, and their occasional suicides, in a gas-filled room, added only one drop more of poison to the poisoned air of some miserable lodging house, and gained only three lines of inconspicuous notice in the papers.

But to Hildegard Sessions this was a battleground, and she loved the very air of it; she loved the delicatessen shops smelling of pickles and scoured wood, the florists, behind whose misted windows the violets made blotches of purple, the dirty streets half cleaned with dirty water, the cheap restaurants with their rumpled damp tablecloths and hot, heartening food.

And above all she loved the theatre, its gossip, its draughts, the smell of dusty costumes and grease paint, the curtain calls and the leaping and fading lights, the orchestra whining, tuning, and scraping chairs while the house filled.

Sometimes she turned the pages of New York theatrical sheets, thrilled to see the addresses of Maude Adams and Blanche Bates listed so casually there; anybody could write them who chose! She was always looking with fear and reluctance for the name of Norman Montgomery, but she never found it. Months went by and were years, and she never heard of him. She never had any news of her parents, or felt any particular desire to learn of them. Was her mother still sitting, sick and comfortable, in the kitchen near the Dump? What were Stewy and Cliff and Lloyd doing? Was her father drinking again, and getting mad regularly on Saturday nights?

She neither knew nor cared.

So trifling a string of coincidences to determine the course of a girl's life! Hildegard often thought of them, afterward, the three tiny circumstances, the three nothings, that had

seemed to unite at the exact psychological moment when they would have a significance for her.

There was, to begin with, the sudden death of a vaudeville actor named Yan Christensen. Yan had travelled on vaudeville routes for years; he was a favourite everywhere. Hildegard, who had come to the wardrobe room early on a particular morning, found herself at the wretched old typewriter, punching out an account of Yan's death for the newspapers.

The mere fact had, of course, been recorded on the day before. But there were circumstances that made the thing more than usually touching, and Hildegard was now sufficiently familiar with the usages of newspaper offices to know that a "human interest" story for the big Sunday theatrical pages would be acceptable.

Yan's wife had died just five days ago—the world didn't know that. And Yan, on the day of his own death, had come in from a long morning beside her grave. He had been feverish, chilly, weary to the very soul of the big noisy applauding world, of the grease paint and the trombone call that brought him to the footlights. He had fallen asleep in his dressing room, muttering to the call boy, when the call came: "Ay late to-day. Dis de first time old Yan ever late."

Hildegard had known him, through the Carlsens, and she found the bright tears splashing on the typewriter keys as she recorded his going to sleep. And suddenly she was writing the story as Carl would have told it, or as Yan himself would have told it.

She took it, that afternoon, to the big newspaper office in Third Street. Her step seemed to be dancing as she went; they might not want it, they might not even read it, but in her heart, for the first time in her life, there swelled the rapturous hope that what she had done, what she had created, was good.

That was the first chance. The second was meeting Sidney Penfield coming out of the big newspaper building as she was going in.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR a minute she did not know him; it was the man who had to establish the recognition. And how charmingly he did it, this big grinning person in the belted coat, with his hat in his gloved hand and the sunshine bright upon his sleek, dark hair.

"Aren't you Hildegarde Sessions?—Of course you are!"

Her puzzled smile flashed up in return. Her small blue hat had a rose on it, and the lining, under the down-turned brim, was pale pink like the rose, and like her burning cheeks. Her gold hair fluffed up against the pink colour, her exquisite eyes were childishly wide in the thick tangle of black lashes.

"Sidney—Mr. Penfield!"

"Sidney, yes—Mr. Penfield, no!" he said, bubbling with easy laughter. "Do you know I've wondered and wondered where you were!"

"I've been working, you know. Oh, ever so long now! I'm on the stage."

"On the stage!" He had delayed her, drawn her aside. He wanted to talk.

"Yes—that is, sometimes. I had a little part two weeks ago; I haven't one now. But I work—I work at the theatre."

"You look as if it agreed with you. I don't have to ask how you are, do I?"

"Oh, I love it! Of course, I'm the humblest sort of a beginner; I've never had any backing," said Hildegarde, suddenly serious and confidential, "and backing, you know, counts enormously. Pictures—why, your picture in the *Boards* costs twenty dollars, and on the cover one hundred! You really"—he was so deeply, so almost passionately attentive that she felt a little puzzled, but she went on—"you really ought to have at least three hundred dollars to

start with, and enough money to run a few weeks without a job!" she said.

"I'd no idea it was so expensive!" Sidney said gravely. But she knew that he was teasing her, and her exultant laugh broke out deliciously.

"I've never had that!" she resumed. "I couldn't, you know. Not," she added, with a confiding and significant smile, "on fifteen dollars a week!"

"Is that what they pay actresses?"

"Oh, no—oh, no!" she corrected him hastily. "When I play I get—well, whatever it is, twenty-five or thirty. But clothes——" Hildegard finished, with an eloquent glance.

"I should say so! I don't know how you do it at all."

"Funny, meeting you here!"

"Well, wasn't it? Funny thing, too, I was trying to get away for fifteen minutes. I'm glad I was delayed now."

"Is your office in this building?"

"My father's offices are. But I'm only finishing college this June."

"Berkeley?"

"Stanford."

"Did you know George Rogers?"

"Yes, I did. Red-haired fellow—he was in theatricals."

"Yes, he only went to college two years. Now he's on the stage, in New York."

Penfield looked at her keenly.

"Did you know Rogers?" he asked carelessly.

Her young blue eyes were innocently raised.

"I knew the girl he went with—Yvonne Richelieu was her name, her stage name. Her real name was Ella Bent. I think she's in the East now, too."

"He was a nice fellow."

"He was awfully nice!"

"But, say, listen. What are you doing now? You couldn't come and have tea with me at the Palace Hotel, or at the St. Francis? Why not at the St. Francis?"

"Well, I've written an—an article, I suppose you'd call it,

here, about an old actor who died. And I was taking it in to see if they'd use it on Sunday. I do some press-agent work, you know."

"Well, you just have to leave it, don't you?"

"That's all."

"Well, leave it. I'll wait for you here, and we'll have tea."

She hesitated, gave him a quietly appraising look.

"All right."

So they presently went to tea together at the St. Francis, Hildegard's bright interested eyes drinking in the variety and charm of the new scene, Sidney magnificently familiar with it all. The music played softly, the perfumed, richly dressed women came and went, call boys shrilled in the big foyer, and the orange pekoe sent a delicately citrus sweetness into the air.

Her first cinnamon toast; her first knowledge of this softly lighted, softly carpeted, softly served world. Beside her plate, blue double violets and one creamy camellia, in silver and purple foil, with a long pin.

A spring afternoon died in lingering colour over the city; the day swooned in mingled odours under a sky of opal softness. Hildegard and Sidney lingered at their little table, murmuring, murmuring.

The young, heart-stirring scent of violets close to her cheek. The young voice of the man opposite her, his glances, his lowered lashes, his up-flashing looks again. The great room, with its coming and going figures, its lofty draped windows on Geary Street, its globes of diamond light high up among the pillars and arches overhead. It was all an enchantment—a dream.

"Nights are bad for me, you see, Sidney—Mr. Penfield, because I work——"

"But why the 'Mr. Penfield'?"

Then that delicious plunge and tug at her heart, and thickening in her throat. She would feel the blood in her smooth cheeks as she dropped her dusky lashes.

"I don't know. I've always thought of you as 'Sidney.' And I think I used to call you that?"

"Why not? I'm going to call you 'Hildegarde.'"

"The next time, then." She felt comfortable, at home. Everything she said seemed to register upon this new, intoxicating background of his friendliness, and everything he said seemed to provoke its natural and easy reply.

"You know, it seems to me if you can write stuff the newspapers can print, that's a much better field—that's more in your line than the théâtre game."

"Well, of course, so far they've only printed actual press-agent stuff. It was just an idea I had to write this today."

"Of course. At the same time, wouldn't you yourself rather write than act?"

"Write!" She widened her eyes. "But my gracious—I've never seriously thought of writing!" Hildegarde exclaimed modestly.

He took a big-brotherly tone, looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well, haven't you, perhaps, come to the time when you ought to think about it?"

"But what makes you——" She was thrilled by his manner of admonition, by the concern this good-looking young man showed in her affairs. "But what makes you think I could?" she demanded.

"Because I think you're a wonderful little person. I think you could do anything, Hilda."

Her happy colour flamed up in a tide, her eyes veiled themselves, and the cleft chin rose as she bit her full lower lip, looked away.

"Ah, don't tease me!"

"I never," said Sidney with deadly earnestness, "was more serious in my life!"

Music, soft lights, soft footfalls, shadows, spring twilight outside the high windows, the odour of violets and orange pekoe within. In the foyer a boy calling, "Mr. Vincent! Mr. Carter! Mr. Vincent!"

Hildegarde's senses swam deliciously upon a tropic sea. She was conscious of a dim interior struggle for a careless manner.

"Well, we'll have to see what this editor says. That's the first thing."

"And will you meet me next Friday—that's the only day I come in, regularly—and tell me about it?"

"I'd like to."

"At the Palace Court, say, at four?"

"Well. But perhaps something else will come up that you'd rather do."

"It won't."

"Well, if it does——"

"But where are you going now?"

"Home, I guess. What time is it? Perhaps I'll walk back to the newspaper office and see what they think of my article."

"I'll walk with you. No, I can't. I've got to meet my father to drive home at half-past six."

"Oh, but it's not that yet!"

They loitered toward the street, their conversation all inconsequential and vague, as far as words went, but throbbing for them both like the fumes of a new and heady wine. And when Sidney left her, Hildegard wandered on in a dream up the familiar streets that were dark now, and humming with the beginning of the night's excitement, past the lighted restaurants, over the crowded crossings.

Talking with Pidgy and her mother at the restaurant supper table, rather than actually sharing their meal, she felt detached, almost light-headed. Radiantly pulsing and weaving thoughts possessed her, her eyes glittered, her voice was soft.

"What'j' do to-day, Hilda?"

"Well, what do you think I did? I wrote an article—I don't know why, I happened to be early in the workroom, and I was fussing with the typewriter. I wrote an article about that poor old fellow Yan Christensen—in dialect."

"How do you mean in dialect, deary?" Mrs. Warner asked. "A sort of brogue?"

"Yes, except that it was Swedish, of course—or Danish, maybe! I used to hear a lot of it at the Carlsens'. And then

I took it to the *Examiner*, and coming out I met a boy I used to know, Sidney Penfield."

"Son of the railway man," Pidgy suggested.

"Yes, really he is!"

"Of course he is, and he gave you a limousine!" Pidgy conceded, with a significant look for the beau of the moment, who made a fourth in the harmonious group.

Hilda played with her chicken; she did not force the point. And slowly—slowly, the long week began to crawl its way to Friday again.

She went through the routine as usual, seeming to love it the more, to sense its flavour the more, for that approaching point. It would come, of course, because it must come. Nothing could keep away Friday, and somehow she felt that nothing would keep away her hour with Sidney.

The moment of meeting, anticipated in so many hours of golden dreams, seemed rather flat and disappointing, after all. But only for a moment. His big figure in its belted coat rose out of a deep leather chair in the Court waiting room lovely with palms and rugs and music, and Hildegard tipped her bright head sideways to smile at him, and gave him her shabby little glove, and almost immediately they were happy again, murmuring, murmuring, in an atmosphere of violets and orange pekoe.

"Oh, and did you see my article, printed, and my name, too?" the girl asked. For this had completed the chain of unexpected events.

"No, I didn't. What a fool not to look for it! But it never occurred to me!"

"I wasn't sure they'd use it. But they did. I have it here," said Hildegard innocently, smiling at him as she opened her purse.

"She is beautiful," Sidney Penfield said to himself, with a little catch of his breath. "With those deep eyes, and that chin, and that gorgeous hair, she is actually *beautiful*."

He could hardly drag his eyes from her face to glance at the much-folded newspaper clipping.

"I can't read this!" he protested boyishly after a moment's

struggle with the dialect. And he handed it back. "I've got to look at you, Hildegarde."

"I hate you to look at this horrible *hat*. It looked so like rain—I wish it would!—that I didn't dare wear my other."

"Well, have you been thinking about me this week?"

"No." She poured cream, glanced up, glanced down again. "I think you take three lumps—it's a waste, but I only take one, so that evens it up."

"You're smart to remember. So you haven't thought about to-day at all?"

"I'm a working woman. I've no time to think about tea parties!"

Sidney took his cup. Her demure gaze met his measured smile.

"You little liar, you thought about it every day!"

"Indeed I didn't. I pretty nearly didn't come!"

Hildegarde stirred her tea, looked about the room easily, met his gaze, and burst into laughter, while the colour crept up under her transparent skin.

"Well, that's better!" Sidney exclaimed, drawing a great breath of relief, and stirring his own cup, after having stared fixedly at her for some seconds. "So they printed your article—good for them!"

"Of course, they've printed what I wrote before, but just press-agent stuff. Once I wrote about Olga Nethersole, and they ran it all."

"Have you tried interviews?"

"Oh, my, no! I wouldn't dare."

"My father has pull with some of the papers," Sidney said thoughtfully.

"I have a friend on one—Swedish or Danish or something. His name is Lars Carlsen."

"He sounds like a big sailor in tarpaulins."

"Well, he is like that, in a way. He's the nephew of the man whose store I once worked in. He talked to me months ago about my press work, how I must do it, and some of the tricks of the trade. And Sunday," Hildegarde said, smiling, "he came over to have supper with the crowd, and he was

awfully pleased about it. He said it was a good start!"

"Oh, and what's the crowd?"

"I don't know—about a dozen of us, twenty sometimes. We go to Moretti's—a little Italian place over on Montgomery. They have a table especially for us—it's lots of fun."

"I know it—I've been there," said Sidney. He was watching her with that funny look that made her heart flutter and her face grow rosy. "And do they all make love to you, Hilda?" he asked.

The word was said. It seemed to hang between them, visible in the air. Sidney was laughing, but he was trembling a little, too. Hilda's bright exquisite skin was drained suddenly of colour, and her blue eyes gave off their strange electric light.

"No—not quite all!"

"And do you like any one of them?"

"No."

"But why not, Hildegarde?"

"Perhaps—perhaps I'm waiting."

Silence. She made her eyes meet his, her dimples deepened at the corners of the wide, sweet mouth. Sidney was motionless, looking at her.

"But what makes you think they might?" she asked, in confusion.

"Might what?"

"Make love to me."

"Because you are remarkable, Hilda—surely you know that? That isn't blarney. That isn't flattery. I mean it. There's a—a something about you, something fine, and—and definite—I don't know what it is. I see you, in a few years—ten years or more—a—a leader among women, a woman at whose feet all the men of the world will be—everyone! You're like that. Surely—surely they tell you so?"

"Surely they don't!" Hildegarde managed to answer prosaically, amusedly. But her senses were swimming. If—if that might be true?

"None of them?" Sidney pursued.

"Not one."

"You don't mean that you haven't a beau?" Sidney half teased, half persisted.

"I *do* mean it." Hilda flung up her proudly set head. "I wouldn't look at one of those boys!" she said disdainfully.

Sidney did not answer at once, but he watched her while she finished her toasted muffin and drank her tea.

"I'm glad of it," he said then approvingly, suddenly assuming his big-brotherly attitude. "You're much too young, and they aren't ready to take on the responsibility of marrying. It'd be a great mistake."

He liked to advise her, and she listened to him with all her impressed soul in her blue eyes. Hildegard lived from Friday to Friday now, and Sidney never failed her. She made no demands on his other hours; to her, at first, they did not appear to exist.

But gradually she came to know more about him, as he did of her. She never mentioned her parents, but she chattered readily enough about Pidgy and Mother Casey, and all the figures in her over-peopled days.

And Sidney told her in return about his father, the old railroad king, and his aristocratic mother, a social ruler on the Peninsula, always flitting to Paris for clothes, or to New York for the opera, and about his pretty sister Helen, a débutante of the past season.

His older brother, Jay, had married a stunning Boston girl, Peggy Paget, and they had a girl baby, named Mary Sidney, for him. Hildegard thought that was "darling."

For the rest, everyone who amounted to anything socially or financially, in San Mateo's most exclusive, most aristocratic circle was a cousin, an aunt, or an intimate friend of the Penfields.

"Helen'll probably marry Charley Choate—at least, that's about settled. He's a corker—Yale man, he was out here last winter, visiting."

"And how old is she—your sister Helen?"

"She's twenty—nineteen, I guess."

"And is she pretty, Sidney?"

"Pretty? Yes, she's supposed to be pretty. Mother had her portrait painted in England last year. She isn't a patch on you, though, if that's what you're worrying about."

"I wasn't worrying about it."

"Well, what are you worrying about?"

"Nothing."

"Do you like having tea with me?"

"You know I do."

"'You know I do!' What an answer!"

She would smile at him demurely. As the weeks went by, and as her power over him deepened and strengthened almost hourly, she had learned to play upon his sensibilities as upon a keyboard.

He came to Moretti's for dinner, met Pidgy and Lars and the crowd, saw Hildegard glowing and golden in their midst, adored, consulted, saw her smiles given to others than himself, watched her when she was presumably unaware of his scrutiny.

And he knew, young as he was, that they saw something in her, as he did, that promised strange things for the future—power, wisdom, the charm that no man can resist.

"Hildegard, tell me, dear, you know how it worries me! Did—did any man ever kiss you?"

"Any *man*? Let me think——"

"Any boy, I mean."

"Yes, one did," she admitted, after a moment's hesitation.

"But it was before I was fifteen—it was five years ago!"

"You goose, you! As if I could mind *that*."

"Sid, you and I have been going together for six months. Do I let you kiss me?"

"You know you don't. But—but why? Why are you so stiff about it, Hildegard?"

A pause. Hildegard's blue eyes narrowed; she spoke slowly, with a little laugh.

"Because I think it's a great mistake, Sid. This sounds prim and old-fashioned, and you know I'm not that! But—looking at the other girls—it always seems a mistake to let go. Afterward they begin to drink, to get sloppy and lazy—

it's always the same. I see them—lots of them, starting in hard and brisk and determined. And then some boy comes along, and it's all softness and crying and being late for rehearsals.

"Pidge doesn't. Mainly, I think, because her mother has determined that she shall marry well; she doesn't seem to have any particular principle about it. But Pidge is always working, always on a job, and I think it's that, because she's straight."

"Well, it's going to be wonderful for the man you *do* fall in love with, Hildegarde," Sidney said, "to feel that he is privileged to wake up that heart of yours!"

"But I'm not going to marry."

"No man is worthy of a girl like you!" he said once, suddenly gloomy, and staring darkly down at the tea table that was between them.

"It doesn't matter whether any man is or not. I'm going to make a name for myself—I'm never going to marry!"

And she tried to convince herself that she meant it. Sidney, with his easy manner of one of the rich men of the world, and the glamour of the big belted coat, and the violets, was not the sort of man to marry a little Tivoli actress, after all. He was too fine for that. Meeting after meeting subtly changed their relationship; subtly made him younger, made her older, developed doubt in her, and a sad precocious wisdom, as he grew daily more confident and less sane.

She came to know his characteristics; the enviable arrogancies of the man whose social and financial standing are impregnable. The solemnity with which he would quote his father's opinions about capital and labour sometimes stirred to puzzled wonder the listener who had been Lars Carlsen's audience through so many long evenings.

Sidney held his own people in deep respect, his father's position, the fact that his mother's name was never to be found in the papers was a cause of satisfaction to him. Hildegarde suspected that he often used his mother's very words in speaking of it.

"Mother's crowd is the conservative crowd, you know.

You'll never find any account of her dinners, or my sister's coming-out dance, or anything, served up for the public to read! I think my mother would die of shame if they put a description of her costume and all that bunk in. She had a man fired from a newspaper once because he dressed up as a waiter and came down to one of the parties of her set."

"In your house, do you mean?" Hildegard asked.

"No, of course not! Mother knows about *her* servants. She doesn't have to call upon the caterers!" Sidney answered magnificently. And that was superbly arrogant, too.

He despised climbers, newcomers, outsiders. Let them flock by themselves and let "us" alone.

"There are about a dozen families, you know—mostly my cousins, the Rogers and Jays and Craigies, that crowd—and we go by ourselves, mostly. None of this newspaper stuff, divorces and parties and all the rest of it! My mother loathes that regular Burlingame crowd."

Hildegard, listening intently, would feel her heart grow cold. Between them ran so deep and wide a gulf that no youthful attraction on his part toward her beauty, and no struggle on hers to meet him, to grow to his measure, might bridge it.

What folly—what folly—to live in a golden dream of him, to walk home from Friday's enchanted tea hour tingling from head to foot with the words, unspoken, yet always ringing in her ears:

"Mrs. Sidney Penfield. Mrs. Sidney Penfield. She was one of the girls at the Tivoli, and he fell in love with her!"

"Nonsense!" Hildegard would say to herself, washing her best frill in a quiet, foggy August morning, pressing it carefully with an iron on a folded towel, washing and brushing and pinning up her bright hair. "Nonsense, why should he love me! There must be fifty girls in his set far prettier, and with everything else besides."

But the dream, the alluring, seductive dream persisted. It lay back of her quiet days, exquisite and heart-filling. In a hundred ways, Sidney's friendship was by far the most thrilling thing she had ever known.

To begin with, he was good. One saw it in his glance, heard it in the cultivated accents of his voice. He had been a good student, interested in college athletics and tramps and theatricals, rather than the less admirable elements of college life. He loved his mother and father and home, spoke of them admiringly, he loved books, he was modest, and yet keenly alive in any debate.

And then he was experienced, travelled, and enormously rich. Hilda's mind refused to picture the reality of being as rich and as important as the San Mateo Penfields. To have one's life filled with clothes, travel, servants, automobiles, opera, to live in magnificent places, to speak carelessly of New York and London, races, yachts, pleasure trips, to have a first-hand knowledge of half the world's important personages, what must that be like?

Beside such a man, any woman's life would be only too intoxicatingly sweet. Always fragrant, idle, furred or silken clad, always free, always with those gold twenties and twenties and twenties in her purse, courted by the shopkeepers, followed by the press and people. . . .

Ah, well, it wasn't going to happen that way, so why make one's self unhappy thinking about it? But Hildegard couldn't help thinking about it.

Beside Sidney's simple, easy polish, the men she knew seemed suddenly coarse and dull and shoddy. The theatre began to take on its true colours of griminess and superficiality and tawdriness. Life lost its flavour; Hildegard grew whimsical and impatient for the first time in all her nineteen years, intolerant of all the pretense and boasting and shabbiness of the world about her.

She listened to the talk that had seemed so magically interesting a few years ago, talk of turns and cues and contracts and parts, with half-veiled, hostile eyes. Vigorously, almost with fury, she cleaned the four cluttered rooms of the Warner apartment, flinging up windows, letting in air. And more than once, upon some day that was not Friday, she wandered into the St. Francis Hotel, where she and Sidney went once a week for tea, and watched, with wistful, be-

wildered eyes, the well-groomed men, the beautifully dressed women who came and went in that enchanting atmosphere of flowers and deep-piled carpets, and softened lights, to the sound of graceful and haunting music.

One day, upon a sudden impulse, she went to a manicure for the first time. And when the time came to buy a new dress, it was the plainest, the most conservative she had ever worn, and the most becoming.

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE fruit of these uncertain, restless days was a visit to the office of a newspaper.

"Mr. Brown, do you remember me—Hildegarde Sessions? I've been doing press work, off and on, for the Alcazar and the Tivoli. And I did a story for you—about an old Swedish actor who died here, Yan Christensen?"

"Remember him perfectly; don't remember the story at all. This isn't a weekly, you know!" Mr. Walter Brown said cheerfully, an appreciative eye upon the beautiful face, a toothpick in the corner of his mouth, his feet conversationally crossed on the desk before him.

"Well—anyway, I did!" Hildegarde went on, with a helpless laugh.

"Check," said Mr. Brown.

"And I was wondering if ever you had—if you might have—if I could do regular work for the paper," the girl floundered, losing heart, but persisting gallantly, and still smiling.

"No harm," murmured Mr. Brown, drawing forward a pad, without taking his eyes off her face, "to put down your name."

She gave it, watching him, correcting his pencil anxiously.

"You'd rather work on a paper than stay on the stage, eh?"

"Oh, much rather!"

"But why?" he asked. "You look as if you might go a long way on the stage, to me."

Hilda flushed and dimpled. He was a nice man, forty, perhaps, brown and small and lean and eager.

"I'm not really on the stage," she protested.

It was a big room, built around an empty square, with

windows all around. The square in the centre was for the hallways and the elevator, there were several doors out, with "City Room" stencilled on them backward. Hildegard liked the atmosphere. When a cub reporter came in and began to talk urgently to Mr. Brown, with his eyes fixed on Hildegard appreciatively, she felt free to glance about the room.

Against the walls were small niches for washstands, hung with filthy towels, and furnished with soap. All along the windows desks were ranged, two and three deep, each with its litter of untidy yellow paper and newspaper clippings and its battered typewriter. Above each desk hung a green-shaded light, and larger lights in the ceiling gushed an avalanche of brilliance upon the room, and made it almost dizzily bright.

The floor was thickly strewn with papers and set with wire wastebaskets; the newspaper offices were a dozen floors above street level, and the high windows were open, and commanded a wide view of roofs, and shipping, and the distant hills of Berkeley across the bay.

At some of the desks men were working busily, pounding their typewriters, clipping newspapers with long shears, struggling with pencilled notes. They paid no attention to anything that was going on, unless one of the many telephones tinkled, when there might be an interruption. The big room was very hot.

Reporters came and went, usually stopping to address the city editor as "Wat." Doors slammed, perspiring oily typesetters rushed in, rushed out again. Almost everyone was smoking, some lounging, some solemn with affairs.

Hildegard told herself that she would like it. It was strangely ugly and alive and inspiring. She would like a desk among all these busy men, she would like the excitement and pressure.

"You wouldn't do society?" the city editor, finishing with the young reporter, suddenly demanded of her with a hopeful gleam in his eye.

"Society?"

"Social editing. It's a pipe," said the city editor, watching her warily.

"What would I have to do?"

"Nothing, practically. You'd have to get hold of a few items about the upper set every day—say, ten. Then Thursday, you'd have to do your Sunday page, and get two photographs for it—that's nothing. And that's all, unless there's a dance or something special, a wedding, maybe, and you'd have to go to that and turn in a story. Pipe!"

"But I don't know anything about society, really," Hilda offered dubiously.

"You don't have to! Here—we've got a book, the Social Register—that gives you all the dope. You'd get on to it like a shot," said Mr. Brown enthusiastically. He dropped his voice, glanced cautiously about him. "The girl I've got, I've got to can," he confided, shaking his head. "She gets all her stuff from the evening papers of the night before! Lazy. And she always has a fit if any one opens a window."

"I think I'd love it!" Hildegard said eagerly.

"Well, listen, I'll have a talk with her, and give her another trial," said Walter Brown, "and if not—out she goes. Hello, Carlsen, sit down."

This last was to a tall, somewhat tousled young man who had come in behind Hilda. She laughed as she stood up and held out her hand to him.

"Hello, Lars!"

"Well, goodness, where'd you come from, Hilda?" Lars asked, bewildered but smiling.

"I'm striking for a job."

"And it looks like she's going to get it, too!" Walter Brown said genially, eyeing their greeting with satisfaction.

"I think she could do it good," Lars admitted, looking at the girl affectionately. "Say, Wat," he added, with sudden recollection, "can I take a photograph from your files?"

"You cannot!" said Mr. Brown comfortably.

"Listen here, it's a special case. It's a picture you'll never need again. I want to use it."

"Bring your camera here and photograph it here," Wat Brown said inflexibly.

"Well——" Lars sighed, his enormous chest heaving like a bellows. "Come on, Hilda, I'll walk home with you!"

"And I'll let you know the minute there's anything, Miss——" the city editor glanced at the name he had just written—"Miss Sessions," he said.

"Thank you!" Hildegard went out with Lars into the quick dusk of the late autumn. The streets were at their liveliest, and she loved them. A few men were lingering at the second-hand bookstore; the movie theatre sparkled with racing worms of red and white lights. The sky was pale gray already set with the first stars. A band of soft dull blue, tinged with palest pink, lay low in the west.

"Hilda, why didn't you tell me you want to try a job—a job on the newspapers? I could have taken you in to meet Wat—he's an old friend of mine; he's a good fellow."

"I don't think I really knew it myself, Lars, it just came to me suddenly that it would do no harm to try. And I don't want to be a hanger-on in a sixth-rate theatre all my life!"

It was a new tone for her; the tall man gave her a surprised and pleased glance.

"Gee, Hilda, I never hear you talk like that!"

"Well—I'm talking like that now."

Lars gave her a clumsy, careful hand, firm under her elbow, on a congested crossing.

"Then it doesn't look as if you were thinking about getting married?" he asked, clearing his throat, assuming a careless air.

"If I what?" Hildegard glanced up at him, her bright face on a level with his big shoulder.

He had to clear his throat again.

"I didn't know but what you might be thinking of getting married, Hilda."

She frowned. The eternal question began in her heart again. Was Sidney in earnest? Was she really going to marry him?

"Ah, well, of course, if I marry, Lars——" she said uncertainly. And the faint shadow that had crossed her own forehead was deepened and intensified on his own.

"Wouldn't you be happier, Hilda, working here, among all your friends, than to marry any man, no matter—no matter how rich he is, and go away?"

"I don't know," the girl said, very low, in a distressed tone.

"Hilda, you must answer me something—you haven't any one else that knows you so well," Lars said with awkward authoritativeness.

Her heart plunged with sudden prescience and terror. They had stopped at a doughnut kitchen window and now stood still, both staring at the great kettle of black fat under the strong dangling light, and the bobbing circles of the little cakes.

"You told me that you had known Sidney Penfield years ago, when you were a little girl," Lars said hurriedly and thickly. "You know what I think, Hilda," he interpolated hurriedly; "you know I don't believe in their man-made marriage at all——"

"No, I know you don't. I know you don't!" the girl answered thickly, nervously, her face averted, only the crimsoning tip of her ear visible between the collar of her coat and the down-drawn curve of hat brim. "I know you believe in protecting beautiful Russian widows!" she added, in a little spurt of resentful retaliation, "and going to Los Angeles with them——"

"Anzia? For heaven's sake!" Lars exclaimed, impatient and amused, "I had to take her down there to introduce her; she's been speaking all over America! We don't even like each other! Why did you mind *that*?"

"I didn't mind it. Only sometimes it seems to me that you socialists are all very eloquent when it comes to doing something that you want to do."

"You are talking like a child!" Lars said angrily, his eyes automatically following the movements of the baker as he lightly turned the doughnuts in the fat. "What I meant to

ask you was this. A man was cruel to you, years ago, and deserted you and your——”

Her sharp, protesting exclamation stopped him. She did not move or meet his eyes. “I never think of that,” she said, in a voice of steel.

“Yes, I know,” he said gently, apologetically. “But what I must ask you is: Is this the man?”

Hildegarde was silent for a space.

“What difference does that make?” she asked then, very low.

“This,” Lars answered with unexpected promptness, “that I know that crowd! If he *isn't*, and you marry him, you must tell him—you know that?”

A haughty quick glance over her shoulder. Then she looked back at the window again.

“Certainly I know that! Do you think I am *crazy*?”

“Well,” said Lars, in relief, “I didn’t know *what* you thought! In his set, you know, if one of the women got on to it——”

Hilda’s face was burning with shame and anger.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, shut *up*, Lars!”

“Well, certainly,” he agreed, in anxious apology. “I only wanted——”

“I don’t care what you wanted!” Hilda exclaimed frantically.

“Why, Hilda—you never talk like this—you never act like this!” Lars protested mildly. “I thought maybe you didn’t know how these rich people feel.”

“*You* know so much about them, of course! You and your precious friends who never get nearer than to hurl stones through their windows!” Hilda said in a shaking voice, beginning to walk on very fast.

“Yes, and I’d rather have a sister of mine throw stones through their windows than marry one of them!” Lars retorted hotly.

“Well, as it happens, *I* wouldn’t, Mr. Lars Alstrupp Carlsen!”

She was only a child, after all, as she threw him a haughty

good-night, and ran into the house, to fling herself down on the couch and sob her heart out; slender body heaving, eyes streaming, nose red from constant convulsive wipings and sniffings.

Pidgy, suspecting a lover's quarrel, was sisterly and comforting, and when Hilda would not go out to dinner, telephoned downstairs for an oyster loaf, and made tea. And Hilda grew calmer, could laugh, with a red nose and tear-swollen eyes, could wash her face and brush her hair, and report at the theatre in quite her usual spirits.

CHAPTER XIX

WATCHING the broad hotel corridor from the sheltered little tea table that was their usual meeting place, Hildegarde usually saw Sidney before he saw her.

He would come hurriedly along the arcade, among the circling and churning women, across the wide foyer where men sat smoking in enormous leather chairs, past the telephone booths and the magazine stand, and stop at the florist's exquisite booth to get Hildegarde's violets.

And here she studied him, admired him, a tall, slender man in a big overcoat, jerking off his glove to get at his purse, grinning at the impressed and obsequious little clerk who served him, handsome, confident, charming.

Sometimes the lovely ladies circling all about stopped him. Hildegarde could even hear their conversation: "Sid, tell your mother—Sid, tell Helen—remember Friday night, Sidney!"

But he always evaded them all, flung overcoat and hat and gloves to the checker and came straight to Hildegarde, to present her with her bouquet, and sink into the opposite chair with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Same old order, huh?"

"Same for me!"

"Wouldn't like to vary it with jam or sandwiches or something?"

"Not for me—no."

"Same order, then, Sherman." He called all the waiters "Sherman." "Thin toast and orange pekoe."

And free to talk, he would turn upon her a radiant look.

"Well, Hildegarde, how goes it?"

"It goes splendidly." They were off. For an hour, an hour and a quarter, an hour and a half, the happy interchange would go on.

He made no secret of his friendship with her, and she loved him for that. He would send his grinning quick nod from the very table quite unconcernedly when some man he knew entered the room. If a woman bowed, Sidney was on his feet, putting an almost military crispness into his answering bow.

But he didn't introduce her. Perhaps, Hildegard told herself, men didn't introduce their girl friends in hotels. Perhaps in the higher social circles that was not done.

One day, when a particularly pretty girl bowed—bowed with a sort of amused and mischievous composure, as she went out in a group of young women—Sidney, sitting down again, and again spreading his napkin on his knees, said with a laugh and a flush:

"That's Peggy—that's my brother's wife. See her laugh? She's been watching you for twenty minutes. She and the Holliday girls and Mary Craigie were having tea at that table there."

"I wish you had told me," Hildegard said, vaguely offended.

"She would have come up if she'd been alone," Sidney went on, still amused. Hilda felt happier, she knew not why. "She'll tell me to-night that she thinks you're a peach," the boy went on. "She was Margaret Paget, of Boston, you know, one of the finest families in this country."

And so strange was the balance that was eternally quivering deep within her soul, the balance between joy and doubt, hope and fear, that Hildegard was hurt again. Family, pedigree mattered terribly to him and to his circle, of course. Of course!

But before Thanksgiving, something happened. One afternoon a generously built and sabled and beautiful woman joined them at tea—Sidney's mother.

This important event occurred quite unannounced. Hilda simply rose from the usual chair at the usual hour to find

two persons facing her instead of one: Sidney more than ordinarily bubbling and radiant.

"Mother, this is Hildegard Sessions. My mother, Hilda."

Immaculate skin, immaculate spats, immaculate gloves, Sidney's mother gave Hildegard a keen, kindly glance from under her dashing hat, settled herself between the two young persons. A handsome woman, blue-eyed, brown-haired, smiling, friendly.

"I'll have just what you have, dear!"

"Then that'll be tea and cinnamon toast, Mother."

"Perfect! But will that be enough for Miss Sessions? You see," said Minna Penfield easily, talking to make Hildegard comfortable, and seeing the girl's every gesture and expression, even while she seemed not to notice her at all, "Sidney here has told me all about you, and that you make your tea your supper."

"I have to be at the theatre at seven," Hildegard said shyly, with a child's brief, fleeting smile. ❀

"I know you do. And tell me, what do you do there? Surely a little creature like you doesn't act?"

"Well—sometimes. But my real work is in the wardrobe room."

"I see. Getting costumes ready and all that?"

Hilda's eyes brightened with innocent surprise and pleasure as she nodded. She had not expected Sidney's mother to show such understanding interest. Mrs. Penfield saw the look and was pleased in turn.

"You know I strongly approve women having work to do—having an avenue for self-expression!" she said vigorously. The tone of a woman who has mounted a hobby came into her voice. "Nonsense for girls sitting 'round waiting for men to marry them!" she said briskly.

"Go to it, Carry Nation!" Sidney said derisively.

His mother stopped short, looked at him patiently, and sipped her tea.

"Yes, it's all very well while they're young, and love-making, and running about to parties!" she said, a little

more mildly. "But let me tell you something, Sidney, there comes a time in any woman's life when her husband and her children don't need her any more, and she wants occupation."

"And Hildegard, in that case, would go back on the Alcazar or the Tivoli stage, is that it?" Sidney laughed, with an air of banter that made the words impersonal.

"Not at all. But there's no use in his poor old mother arguing with him, Miss Sessions, because you see he takes it all as a joke! But of course not. Only a woman who has a profession, who has had a business career, knows how to utilize her leisure when she gets it. She's definite—she's developed. More than that," went on Mrs. Penfield, with a pleasant sort of authoritative definiteness that Hildegard recognized as characteristic of Sidney, too, "More than that—we all have too much money, and some day the proletariat will rise and take it away from us; and then it'll be an excellent thing indeed if some of us have a little sense!"

Hildegard laughed joyously. But she felt more than amusement. She liked Sidney's mother; she was not afraid of her. This last sentiment she determined to quote to Lars.

"And now, Hildegard," said Mrs. Penfield, when a most harmonious hour was over, "this boy will walk home with you, and get the car, and pick me up here in half an hour, if that's enough? And bore me," Mrs. Penfield went on, with a significant, humorous glance at her son, "all the way home with a dissertation about you! You see I'm calling you Hildegard—it's a lovely name."

"I'm so glad you are!" Hildegard said confusedly, happily. Her heart soared; it was all settled now. There was no mistaking this.

"One other thing," said Sidney's mother. "I shall have my sister from Baltimore here with me this week—just widowed. Mrs. Hunter Allison. She's a quite lovely person, isn't she, Sidney? Her home in Baltimore is just across the street from the old home where we both grew up. She's coming on Wednesday. But of course we shall be very quiet—she's not going out at all."

Hilda, slightly confused, listened respectfully. They were

all standing now, and Mrs. Penfield had both Hildegarde's hands in hers. There was the sweetness of violets, furs, delicate perfume in the dim, warm lamplighted room. The orchestra was playing.

"So, what I want to know is, will you come down and lunch with us on Sunday?" Minna Penfield finally said. "Take the half-past eleven train from Third and Townsend, get off at San Mateo, and Sidney'll meet you? Can you do that?"

"Why—why, of course I can! I'd love to!" Hildegarde stammered.

"Then do so." Mrs. Penfield smiled encouragingly, turned away. Sidney was in wild spirits as he escorted Hildegarde home.

She had thought and had trembled a little at the thought, that he would ask her to marry him, on this short walk of three or four blocks. But he did not. He dwelt instead upon the charm and generosity of his mother.

"She's a sport, my mother! She just casually mentioned it—two or three days ago. 'When are you going to have tea with your girl again, Sid?' she said. 'Want me to come along?' Did you like her, Hildegarde?"

"*Like* her? She's perfectly wonderful!" Hilda said, not quite sincerely. For it was just a little chilling to find one's self so unexpectedly under fire, one's own sentiments of shyness or resentment so disregarded.

"Isn't she, though?" Sidney exulted. "She liked you, too. That's Mother. She makes her mind up faster than any other white woman I ever saw. Don't you think she's fine?"

"Ah, she's lovely."

"I knew you'd think so! And she liked you, too." He was silent for a minute. Then, "Wear your black dress with the collar on Sunday, won't you, Hilda?" he asked.

"I thought I'd wear this. That's so plain."

"Oh, no, please wear that! You look adorable in it!"

"Well—if you want me to. But this one I bought from an actress named May Raisch—she wore it in 'Tess,' only she got too fat for it—and it's a much prettier dress."

"Well, but the black one's the most becoming thing you have."

"All right. I'll wear it."

They were at her door. He had sometimes, here in the shadow of the entrance arcade, asked her to kiss him good-night. Hildegarde, except perhaps for a brief pressure of her temple against his lips, or the swift brushing of his firm cheek with her soft tawny hair, had always refused. But she liked him to ask her; it thrilled her to say no.

To-night he was boyish, excited, exhilarated, but he teased for no favours. She suspected that he was wild with eagerness to get back to his mother and discuss his girl; and although Hildegarde could hardly blame him for that, she felt just a little blank and disappointed.

"However, he loves me and I love him, and we're going to be married—and I've met his mother, that's something!" she summarized it, giving herself a sort of mental and spiritual shake as she went slowly upstairs.

"How clever they are," Hildegarde said to herself admiringly. "How sure of themselves they are! And how clever."

The Penfields of San Mateo. The richest, the most influential family in the state. And, pleasantly accepted among them, made one of them for this amazing Sunday at least, Hildegarde Sessions, child of Rudy and Nelly Sessions, and of the shanty near the Dump.

She couldn't be imagining it, surely? This wasn't a dream. Sidney had quite actually and unmistakably met her at a quite material train, and had brought her here. "Broad-hall," the magnificent mansion set on a rise of ground, surrounded by great oaks, stretches of greensward, sunken gardens, Italian pools, was real. The terraces, the balustrades and urns, the stone steps, the wide driveways—these were all real.

And she was quite consciously herself, awake, moving in this strange scene. Servants were opening doors for her,

strange faces were smiling at her; with the exquisite tact that was a part of their heritage and training, the Penfields were being nice to her.

Did that mean that Sidney really meant to marry her? What else? She asked herself the questions with a wild excitement almost like fear in her heart. Did men of his type casually ask perfectly unknown girls into their homes? Did their mothers accept these girls with the simplicity with which Mrs. Penfield accepted Hildegard, if nothing serious were afoot?

No, it must be that the strangeness, that was yet no dream, was to extend on beyond the glories and surprises of to-day. Hildegard Sessions, admired by Sidney Penfield, entertained by his mother, was going to come here some day as one of them—as a member of the family.

His exultant, boyishly delighted manner indicated it. He was, in a way, already sharing it with her, rather than merely displaying his home. He spoke joyously to the butler, to a maid, as he and Hildegard came in.

Where was Mrs. Penfield?—and please to take Miss Sessions's coat. He turned to Hildegard triumphantly.

“Do you like it, Hilda?”

“Like it!” she echoed, awed. She followed him into the house without words. It was almost frightening, she could not assimilate it; it was all bewildering and wonderful. The enormous hall went back to a great square stairway, delicately panelled, and with a finely turned railing. There were tapestries on the walls, great rugs sprawled on the floor, a fire flickered in an enormous open fireplace.

Rooms—rooms. Endless, apparently, and each one more remarkable than the last. Glimpses of the ranged backs of books, glimpses of long tables carelessly strewn with magazines and lamps, glimpses of chairs, and great jars of flowers, and Chinese screens all gilt and filigree, and Spanish chests, hand-carved and hasped in bronze.

All the windows gave views of oaks and lawn and gardens. and clean-raked paths and tiled terraces. There were oil

paintings on the walls, paintings of trees, and cows standing in rivers, and portraits of women in stiff satin dresses and white gloves.

And only a few miles away, Hildegarde thought, as she followed Sidney on and on through all this splendour, there was another house, a dirty whitish house beside a Dump. . . .

Mrs. Penfield was in a sort of morning room whose gay chintzed windows let in a flood of winter sunshine. She and her son's pretty young wife, her sister, and a nurse and a maid were watching the tiny granddaughter of the family eat her noon meal: minced spinach, beef juice, toast, creamed carrots, milk, apple sauce, graham cooky.

They welcomed Hildegarde and Sidney, who were invited to join the entranced audience.

"Isn't she a darling!" Hildegarde breathed, of the tow-headed baby.

"Isn't she a duck?" the proud grandmother said. "Don't feed it to her so fast, Mason."

"*I* think she's a regular duck!" the mother said. "Try the beef juice again. Yes, she's a cute little scrap. We couldn't get her to *touch* the asparagus," young Mrs. Penfield added in a low, significant tone to her mother-in-law. "Mason almost killed herself, didn't you, Mason?"

"Oh, indeed, she seemed to recognize it instantly, madam. She wouldn't touch it."

"I think that is perfectly extraordinary!" said the elder Mrs. Penfield. And to her sister, the middle-aged widow, she explained interestedly: "We tried it—it was three weeks ago, wasn't it, Mason? Imagine, three weeks! And she wouldn't touch it. I do think that's extraordinary."

"Hello, Mary! Hello, Mary—whose baby are you?" Sidney said to the baby.

"Don't distract her now, Siddy, she's supposed to be eating. Eat it, lamb!"

Two men now came in from the terrace and joined the party. The baby's father, Jay Penfield, and Sidney's father, "old A. J." These, after Hildegarde had been hastily introduced, also centred their attention upon the baby. They

were in golfing clothes, just in from a morning on the links.

"Having her lunch, eh? That's good, isn't it, Mary? M'm'm, isn't that good?"

"I was just telling your mother that we didn't care one bit for our a-s-p-a-r-a-g-u-s," spelled Peggy.

"What do you think of that, Mom?" Jay Penfield asked, pleased, with a quick glance and nod at his mother.

"I don't think it's so strange," said the widowed aunt's sorrowful voice. "Dear, dear little thing, she has her likes and dislikes already."

"She knows her own mind, that one!" said her grandfather.

"She's only fourteen months old—pretty smart, eh?" Sidney asked Hilda.

"Imagine her being so young!"

"My daughter-in-law's doctor told me that he never in his life had seen a young baby so developed," Mrs. Penfield senior told Hildegard seriously. "She's like a child of three now—she never was a baby, really."

"She's her mudder's lamb!" said Peggy, kissing the top of the silky head.

"Well," said Mr. Penfield, "I've got to dress for lunch—bridge at the club this afternoon!"

"I'll change, too, even if I play again later," said Jay.

"You don't have to, dear, nobody coming—I'm sure Miss Sessions will forgive you."

"I've got to slide into something decent." This was Peggy. "That miserable hospital board is coming at four."

They drifted away from the morning room, parted in the hall. Sidney, his mother, aunt, and Hildegard went into an upstairs sitting room, less formal than the rooms downstairs, and delightful with big chairs and books and flowers.

"Well, Hildegard, you made your train without any trouble? Georgina, I introduced Miss Sessions? Of course. Sit there, Hildegard, and you sit there, Sidney. Haven't we a pretty sweet baby?"

"She's a darling!" Hildegard repeated admiringly.

"Not being the regulation mother-in-law," Mrs. Penfield

said, in her pleasant, finished voice, "I'm extremely fond of my son's wife. That isn't usual, is it? But I refuse to hate Peggy just because it's expected of me. Mary spends about half her time here, and just at present my son's home in San Francisco is being altered, and I have them all here. And that delights Mr. Penfield—he can't have enough of them. I told you what he said this morning?" she diverged, turning toward her sister.

"Yes, you did, Minna. But tell Sidney, he didn't hear it."

"Well, I told your father that I thought the children's home would be ready for them about Thursday or Friday," Mrs. Penfield said to her son, "and he quite turned on me. 'You must have given them a hint that they'd worn out their welcome here!' he said."

Sidney shouted:

"Oh, I love that!"

"What's funny?" asked Helen Penfield, an extremely pretty girl, with an air of frailness and a plaintive voice, coming in. "I'll introduce myself to you, Miss Sessions. Of course, Sidney's told me all about you," she said, in a bored voice with a smile.

"Your father, when I suggested Peggy and Jay go home—I told you that."

"Yes, and I loved it," said Helen to Hildegard. "You know my mother is perfectly cuckoo about the family," she added. "She thinks we're all remarkable."

"I agree with her," Hildegard said shyly, daringly, with sudden bright colour.

"Oh, you're very sweet," Helen said, bored, giving the other girl instantly the impression of being snubbed.

"I don't think so at all, Hildegard," Mrs. Penfield said. "But too many of these big houses are perfect mausoleums! I want my children and their friends to feel that this is home—that they belong here."

CHAPTER XX

THERE was a great deal more about the family as the day wore on. There were allusions to its past glories, to generals and admirals and judges and statesmen who had belonged to it. On the walls were portraits of the family, and fine old samplers, and pedigrees drawn into many-branched trees. In the bookcases were books written by and about the family: the Reids and Porters and Richmans and Athertons and Jays.

And besides all this, there was an atmosphere of family. It pervaded the place, the fineness and niceness, cleverness and courage, the quality of the family.

Cousins came in after luncheon, splendid persons, admirably and amazingly sure of themselves. Hildegarde was shy with them, but made all the better impression for that. They had all been doing everything in life worth doing, evidently, since they were born. There were comfortably familiar allusions to Paris, to yachting trips, to favourite riding horses, to somebody's portrait painted by somebody, to the awful day somebody had to lunch with Mother at the Embassy, to poor Sybil, way up on the top of that outrageous camel, to poor Cousin Dick, getting his luggage all marked exactly the same as was Aunt Dolly's, after all!

"You heard from Martha, dear?"

"Oh, yes—they're with the Pendletons, in Cairo."

"You'll be riding to-morrow, Porter?"

"I'll pick you up. Have him shorten that bit, by the way."

And Hildegarde, listening, said to herself again:

"How clever they are. How sure of themselves they are."

Sidney's aunts and uncles and the old friends of the family were all of a type, she perceived. They drifted in, during

the afternoon, handsome middle-aged women, definite and assured and kindly, fine-looking stalwart men proud of their sons and daughters, handsome stalwart assured boys and girls who were growing up to meet the requirements of their race as fast as they could.

The little children, in charge of nurses or governesses, were adorable. Then came a gawky age of knees and elbows, and gold-barred teeth and thick clubbed hair. And then began Sidney's generation, eager, intelligent, educated, groomed, equipped to the last semicolon for the business of holding their proud place in the world.

They all worked harmoniously and hilariously over a jigsaw puzzle for a while after luncheon with much discussion of parts and direction of what appeared to be a family play in course of production. Then everybody went for a walk through the bare trees, and up over the oak-wooded hill behind the splendid long lines and terraces, and the mildly smoking chimneys of "Broadhall."

Through all of this, Sidney was conceded to Hildegarde simply and readily, as a matter of course. Everyone spoke to her pleasantly and easily, conversation was made facile, and there were even complimentary arch allusions to his admiration for her, and to her beauty.

"Never in the course of my life have I seen such hair!" said Isabelle Rogers.

"No, did you, Isabelle?" Mrs. Penfield agreed quickly, as Hildegarde, upstairs with the women of the family, before tea, loosened the tawny, silky web of it, and let it fall, in a very tangle of golden little drakes'-tail ends and shining lengths upon her shoulders. "It's a perfect glory!"

"Not that there aren't other points, too," said one of the older girls; a girl named Marie Louise Holliday, who was engaged to Sidney's cousin, Joe Craigie. And her rather unnoticeable, nice brown eyes laughed into Hildegarde's deep-set blue eyes.

Yet in spite of their unexpected niceness and generosity, or perhaps because of it, Hildegarde was left, when the afternoon was over, with a profound sense of depression.

They were so different from herself! They were so far, so far above her in every way! She felt herself again the clumsy, tumbled, shabby child of the Dump beside them.

How might one ever climb to their heights, they who had been protected, guided, guarded in every hour of their lives, who had had everything life could offer, from their first hour of fleecy blankets and uniformed nurses, their first silver bowls and florists' boxes of baby roses?

Just their pronunciation of a foreign word, their references to books and plays and music filled her with despair. Had the girls happened to see such-and-such an opera last winter? Did Isabelle's new horse seem to have an easier mouth than poor old "King Cole"? Would Aunt Minna try the new governess on Italian to-morrow, and see what she thought of her pronunciation?

It was all too complicated, too bewildering to grasp. Hildegard, beside Sidney on the front seat of the car, driving the seventeen miles to the Warners' apartment, was rather silent.

And again, he did not give her the praise for which she hungered, he did not ask her what she thought of this enormous group of related or almost-related folk. He eulogized them instead.

"Isn't Peggy a dear? She was Margaret Paget of Boston, you know—Governor Paget's niece. When he was Ambassador she used to visit him in Belgium; they say she speaks the most beautiful French in America. Don't you like Marie Louise?—not half as pretty as Isabelle or Sarah, but everyone likes her. My sister's young man wasn't there—Charley Choate—he had to go back to Boston, but he's coming on in January, and I expect they'll announce it then. He's rich as Croesus—they say he's going into diplomacy now that his father's dead. What do you think of Aunt Georgina, isn't she a gay old girl? My uncle died only three months ago, and she's all broken up. Her son is in the Legislature—his wife was the daughter of Senator Penderson. There's been a Reid and an Allison in the Legislature ever since Washington's time."

Hildegarde, in the pause, could find nothing to say. There was no senator, no general, no diplomat that she knew of in the Sessions family. She was completely silenced, overpowered.

"Of course, you know that they all came in to have a look at you!" Sidney added, with a chuckle.

But he didn't ask her to marry him. He didn't ask her to marry him! And, with the blood creeping sensibly into her smooth cheeks, as she rode along beside him in the winter dusk, she realized that he didn't have to, to-day. He might go back at his leisure, and find out what his family thought of his girl, and return to her when he would.

That was what it meant to be a Penfield, a Rogers, a Craigie!

"Well, if they did, let's hope, then, that they liked me," she suggested drily.

"Like you? They're crazy about you! Anybody could see that," Sidney triumphed. But when he spoke again it was not of Hildegarde, it was of Peggy, his brother's Bostonian wife.

"Of course, Mary ought to have been a boy, that was an awful disappointment to my father and mother, although they adore the kid now. The oldest son's oldest son means a lot to them—that sort of thing. But Peggy'll have more children, she knows that it's really—well, really important to my mother and father and all the clan that there shall be Penfields to carry the line along. Peggy was telling me the other day that her mother had four girls before she had a boy—Peggy has two little brothers only eight and ten."

"*À la royauté*," Hildegarde suggested.

"Well, she was a Paget, you know," Sidney conceded, simply. "I suppose if America *has* royalty, it's in such families as that."

He left her in disorderly, cluttered Turk Street at half-past six, turned away to fly back down the Peninsula, back to the polished floors and uniformed servants, the flowers and fires, the pleasant, cultivated voices.

Hildegarde went upstairs to Pidgy and Pidgy's mother. The parlour seemed crowded with cushions and tidies and fringes and garments, newspapers and programmes and soiled slippers; the air was close.

Pidgy, with a sodden and filthy kimono wrapped tightly about her, was yawningly arguing with her mother about dinner plans. She had apparently just awakened from too-sound sleep; her hair was tousled, and her face blotched and swollen.

Mrs. Warner was attending to a troublesome foot; like most of the women of her generation, she had always worn shoes two full sizes too small, with heels that pitched her whole body forward into an attitude unendurably strained. Her bare foot was hideous with misshapement and growths and looked like nothing human.

"And I say it's twenty-two years to-day since your poor father was taken, and I won't go!" she was saying, as Hildegarde entered.

"My poor father! That's just an excuse," Pidgy said sulkily.

"Excuse! If ever a man was adored by his wife, and a saint on earth——" Mrs. Warner began shrilly, looking up from the point of her scissors.

"Is it twenty-two years?" Hildegarde interposed sympathetically, pacifically.

"Mama'll rub that in!" Pidgy muttered resentfully, "so's that everyone'll know that I'm twenty-three!"

"I suppose you'd like to have me lie about your own father?" Mrs. Warner demanded hotly.

"Well!" Hildegarde said, laughing, "I'm glad I didn't ask Sidney Penfield to come up."

"Oh, say, what kind of a time j'have?" the older woman asked interestedly, instantly diverted.

"Oh, very grand, of course. It's a magnificent place. Lots of the family were there—cousins and aunts——"

"Well, now, Hilda, of course, you're engaged!" Pidgy interrupted, in keen concern not quite untinged with jealousy.

"No, I'm not—honestly, Pidge. He'll talk"—Hilda hesitated—"he'll talk one day as if it was all settled, and then—another time——" she began frankly.

"Don't I know the way they do!" Pidge said fervently. "Once I was nearly engaged to one of the Hamilton boys. Honest to God, I never knew where I was with him!"

"Leave me tell you," Mrs. Warner said impressively, wincing under self-inflicted pain, "there isn't one of them but'd take all you'd give him, believe me!"

The girls looked at each other and laughed irrepressibly.

"You know all about it, Mama, of course!" Pidge said. "You that was married at seventeen."

"I've been a widow twenty-two years this very night, Hilda," the older woman stated mournfully. "'You ain't nothing but a child with a baby dolly,'—that's what my first manager said to me, as God is my judge! I had Pidge with me; I was just a golden-headed child with my way to make in the world, that's all I was!"

"You were a wonder," muttered Pidge, still smouldering.

"I was such a wonder, Hilda," Mrs. Warner said with sudden spirit, "that I couldn't bring up my only child so she wouldn't sass me and mock me."

"Mama," Pidge said impulsively, visibly softened by this reproof, "you don't really want to sit here and gloom all evening because my father died twenty-two years ago to-day? Lissen, according to that, he died twenty-two years and one day ago to-morrow, and twenty-two years and two days ago the day after to-morrow——"

"You don't understand, Pidge, because you've never been a widow," her mother interrupted patiently.

"Well, that isn't my fault, Mama! Give me time."

Hildegarde heard the mother's outraged and reluctant laugh, and saw her begin to unhook her house dress as a preliminary to changing to restaurant attire, and she went into the bedroom to wash her own face and brush up for the evening.

She sighed as she did so. Not from depression exactly, rather from the confusion and nervous strain of the day. So

many new faces, new impressions, so much to assimilate and classify in mind and heart.

Had they liked her, the great Penfields? Had she disgraced herself, betrayed herself? What had they thought about her, what were they saying about her now?

She splashed her hot face in the water that was scented with the mottled soap, groped for a towel, looked out into Turk Street as she combed her hair.

"Oh, what does it matter what they think? I'm not going to marry him!" she said, half aloud, in sudden impatience. And she joined the others, and fared forth into the brightly lighted, surging Sunday-night streets, determined to put the whole question out of her mind.

It persisted, however. In five minutes, Hildegarde was telling herself that if to-day she had utterly disillusioned Sidney, he would send her some message postponing their usual Friday tea engagement, and wondering when it would come.

Their beautiful voices, their beautifully groomed hands, haunted her. Such exquisite frocks, such exquisite silk stockings, such a background! Lucky, lucky girls.

She did not quite see herself introduced there as a Penfield, exactly on the level of the important Peggy who had been a Paget of Boston. Presuming that she did marry Sidney, would she occupy one of those magnificent upstairs bedrooms, spacious, elegant, supplemented by large dressing rooms panelled with wall closets, and with bathrooms all snowy linens and white tiles? Would she be a rich man's wife? What would it feel like to be a rich man's wife?

The expected message came from Sidney duly the next day. But it had not the content she had expected. It was accompanied by a bunch of double white violets, moist, sweet violets in whose blue heart was a scentless camellia; and it read:

Hildegarde dear, has your left ear been burning? Everyone's been saying nice things about you. Wednesday is a holiday; mayn't we have tea then at the usual place and time?

Wear these flowers to-night, and love

SIDNEY.

She stood looking at the card, holding the flowers whose sweetness rushed up against her suddenly paled cheeks. And she admitted, for the first time, that it was love that was stirring in her heart.

How many persons knew her secret, after all?

She asked herself the question on the following Saturday morning, when she and Lars Carlsen were running down the Peninsula in the dreadful old automobile he had bought and christened, with Hildegard's help, "The Car Beautiful."

A reportorial consignment was taking Lars to Woodside, and he had asked Hildegard if she wouldn't like to go with him. The car was open, mud-spattered, it rocked perilously from side to side as it went upon its way, it creaked, and more than once it began to smoke mysteriously, and Lars had to descend from the high front seat and plunge his big blond head into the rust-stained, nicked hood.

But Hildegard had been enjoying herself. She had been living already in the joys of to-morrow, Sunday, when Sidney was to call for her at eleven o'clock, take her down again to "Broadhall," to lunch again with the family, and this time to be his mother's guest overnight.

Yesterday had been Friday. And if he had not asked her, over their orange pekoe and cinnamon toast, to be his wife, it was because he was only waiting for to-morrow! To-morrow when they would have the beautiful rugs, the polished floors, the portrait-hung walls, the airy, exquisite, perfumed environment of his own home for a setting.

So that the happiest thoughts that ever make a girl's heart flutter, and her clear colour come and go with dreams of inevitable delight, had had possession of her, and for the first ten miles Hildegard had seen only a sort of magic in the shabby houses, the bare roads, the factories and fences and sheds that lined the highway.

Then, uninvited, the first little pang of doubt and fear had crept in. What would Sidney say if he knew? What would happen if he knew?

Before this, whenever she had thought of the secret that she must hide for ever, it had been with the impatient feeling that Sidney Penfield could not be by any chance in earnest in his courtship, and that therefore it was useless for her to torture herself with speculations as to whether he would or would not forgive her for the old, dim, youthful sin.

But now she knew that to-morrow was going to bring her certainty of the greatest happiness she had ever dreamed—or any girl had ever dreamed. The happiness of promising herself to the man she loved.

An honourable, a winning and lovable, a rich and good and handsome man. Sidney Penfield, son of the San Mateo Penfields.

What would he say if he knew? What would he feel if he knew?

She would never know, of course. She couldn't risk telling him. She wouldn't even entertain the thought for a second. It must be put instantly out of her mind.

No, that was over. No need to worry about it, it was years—years in the past!

But—just for curiosity she would count them, the persons who knew about it.

Lars, sitting here beside her, whistling softly as he drove the Car Beautiful, for one. But then Lars was a Dane, and those northern races had peculiarly generous—or were they peculiarly animal?—ideas about women's moral freedom. Besides, Lars was her friend; he felt for her a dog-like, a quiet and brotherly devotion of whose quality she had been growing more and more confident as the years of friendship lengthened between them. Lars, she told him affectionately, was her Great Dane, he would sleep outside her door, he would bark and show his teeth when anything threatened her.

Then, of course, the Carlsens knew, and that didn't matter at all. They would never betray her; they liked her. A nurse or two and the doctor at the hospital would hardly remember one girl among so many, would never identify her as that long-ago "Hilda Smith." And her father and mother, and whoever they had chosen to tell, knew. Somebody had

suspected something—some man's coarse insinuation had sent her father raging home on that long-ago Thanksgiving morning—but that had been only a suspicion, nothing more! Whoever he was, he had long ago forgotten.

Nobody else. Except that man—somewhere out in the world—the man who had wronged her.

“Lars, look—turn left here instead of right, and I'll show you where I used to live when I was a little girl! Bay Lane must be right in here somewhere. Bay Lane, one half mile—it says so on that sign. But it's all changed. Left again—up this way. But I'd never know it, they've built it up so! Look at that line of apartments! Wait—slow down. It ought to be right here—ah, there it is!”

The streets had been straightened; the willows and mallows were gone. On the unsavoury base of the Dump lines of three-story flats had been built, factories had arisen. A sign warned the public: “Dump No Rubbish Here.”

Forlorn, adrift at a crazy angle, shabbier than ever now that its neighbours had grown so respectable, the old house stood, however, in its collapsing tangle of fence, with its background of railroad tracks and of chilly sea.

A great sign hung crookedly on the front door: “To Let or For Sale.” Blinds banged dismally in a gust of wind; a loose shingle flew up, sank again. Dried grasses and dead weeds choked the dreary oblong of the back yard.

Lars stopped the car; he and Hildegard sat staring, the girl's full lower lip caught between her teeth, her pitiful, beautiful eyes half hidden by the lowered thick lashes, her breath coming with an occasional hitching sigh.

“That's where I lived, Lars.”

“I thought your folks lived there still.”

She sent him a fleeting oblique look, returned her gaze to the house again.

“I did, too. I wonder when they moved away? I wonder where they are?”

The dingy, broken panelling, dirty grayish white. The coated windows, more than half broken. The battered kitchen door with its dilapidated stoop, the yard where

"Maybill" and the boys had played, with cold red lumps of hands, and sore little running noses.

How often Hildegard's young feet had run across this space, going to the butcher's for sausages, to the baker's for a "fresh twist loaf." How often she had raked and swept—so futilely!—this unfriendly, tin-can-strewn earth.

Where were they, the old faces and the old days? She was twenty now. She was going to marry one of the richest young men in the state. How had it all come about?

"Let's get down." The fur collar of her heavy homespun coat about her ears, her little beaver hat pulled snugly down against the restless winter airs, she walked through the open gate and slowly went about the forlorn building.

The kitchen door opened to her touch, they were in the rat-infested damp, stale-smelling room. A hundred sharp odours assailed them: the smell of dead air, dirt, rats, decay, rotting wood and old grease, mouldy cloth, ashes, plaster.

"What a hole to call a home, Lars!" She laughed desperately, desolately. "If you could know the times I've swept it, the dishes I've washed at that sink, the meals I've cooked over those cracked stove plates! I remember the very day my father put that empty kerosene can under there for a stove leg—evidently the stove wasn't even worth moving. And that splash on the wall, what lickings my brother Cliff and I got for spilling a great pot of beans there."

There was a shadow across the open doorway; the girl turned like a flash, her face paling, her eyes filled with fear.

But it was only a stout neighbour, Mrs. Hersey, who had seen the car stop, and the strange lady and gentleman get out, and who had come over to say that she had the keys to the house, and that the owner would make repairs for a tenant.

"You don't remember me, Mrs. Hersey?"

A shrewd look through strong glasses. Then amazement, up-flung fat hands, awe.

"Well, Hilda Sessions—but ain't you grown to be the regular young lady! Well, say, I wish George Hersey was here, he was always a great one to believe in you! 'She's

goin' to make somethin' of her life, that young one is!' he'd say, and I guess you have, too. Hear her papa talk you'd think so Mr.—Mr. Carlsen, please to meechoo!—yes, sir, Rudy Sessions always said they never was any one as smart as his girl. Well, say, tell me how the folks like Los Anglus—getting on good, are you? I surely am glad. Let's see, you went first, didn't you, Hilda?—or no, did your papa go first, and then you and your mama go? No, it was the other way, you went first, that's right, and then they went down. Well, say, I wish George was home! Say, someone you know *is* home though, Birdie Beyermann; all she had when her husband died was five kids, and now she's going to marry again. What do you know! George Hersey says, 'Well, that's another feller that'll believe in trial marriage from now on.'"

Pouring out all this and a great deal more in an enthusiastic stream, holding her head on one side affectionately, and catching Hildegard by one shoulder, to keep her turned toward the light, Mrs. Hersey quite innocently included in her first exclamations of pleasure and welcome all that the girl wanted to know—a hundred times more than she had ever dared to hope.

They had moved immediately from the neighbourhood—and they had not betrayed her! The consciousness of it went through her, body and soul, like a great wave of new life. This old world of hers was dead, as far as she was concerned, her last tie with it severed, her parents, wherever they were, as determined as she was that no haunting voice should ever echo from it across her own present or theirs.

Stepping through muddy stretches, and avoiding holes and cans, Mrs. Hersey walked with her to the car, still voluble.

"Ain't married yet, Hilda? Well, what do you know! But you surely do look grand! My Carrie married when she wasn't but sixteen—make you mad. Her father was never one to hold with licking his children—he'd always say your papa done too much of that. But when Carrie run off, he says to me, 'Maybe Sessions was in the right of it. Look how good his children always done,' he says. 'And he'd take

the skin off 'em every Saturday night regularly!' We seen in the paper that your brother Stewy—maybe it was Lloyd, won a movie prize for a scenario—he ain't more'n seventeen, is he, Hilda? What do you know! I call that real smart. Was it three hundred dollars? Well, say, give my love to each and ev'ry one of 'em. How's Mama?"

"About the same," Hildegard, from the front seat of the car, answered, smiling, but somewhat pale. She turned in the car as they jerked and rattled away, to look back at the house, crazy, dirty, falling apart, still hideous, standing, as she had always remembered it standing, like some drunken thing beside the Dump. The water, beyond it, was ruffled icily in the wind; along the shining double line of the tracks a train puffed steadily and slowly, sending white curls of smoke up into the air, winding its way out of sight beyond the rough shoulder of the hill.

They drove away, the automobile bumped in the ruts and holes of the road, struck firmer ground, reached the highway once more.

"Beyermann's Market," Hildegard said; "the Shedd's house, and the Obliskis'——"

"Was that the school you went to, Hilda?"

"At first, yes—when I was seven. I can remember going home crying all the way when my first report card marks were bad, because my father was always looking for an excuse to whip us—used to enjoy it, I think. But then afterward I went to San Bruno High—I loved that!"

"High School, huh?"

"Oh, yes. I was the youngest girl that ever graduated from that High School. My father gave me five dollars, and I had a dotted Swiss dress——"

She fell silent, remembering that happy summer when she had first realized what life could mean to prettiness, and cleverness, and fifteen.

"Well, and then?"

"Then I entered the Teachers' Institute, in August."

"You were going to be a teacher!"

"Certainly. Didn't I ever tell you that? It makes me

feel sort of sad," Hildegarde added, "seeing the old place where I was such a dirty spit-cat of a little girl. They—they had such hopes of me!"

Her voice fell on the last words, as if she said them to herself. Lars shot her a quick glance.

"Wouldn't you write them now, Hilda?"

"No. Not now!"

The big man kept his bare hands on the wheel, stared ahead of him, cleared his throat.

"I guess you didn't do anything so awful!"

"I didn't think I did," she conceded, with a deep sigh.

"Well, then, you didn't. A thing is only as bad as what you think it is!" Lars said.

She laughed forlornly, shook herself visibly, as if she shook off her serious mood, and plunged her hands deep into the pockets of her homespun coat.

"Most people don't look at it as you do," she said. "I was a fool. But I'm not a fool any longer! When you come to an easy place, let me drive again, will you? I want so to learn!"

"What do you want to learn for?" he asked, managing a fleeting smile at the pretty eager face with its loosened rings of gold hair blowing up against the beaver hat.

Hildegarde answered on a laugh:

"I want to learn everything!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE next afternoon was windy and rainy, but that did not keep Sidney and the stalwart, confident cousins indoors. They all went for a walk immediately after lunch, scrambling through oak woods and across almost obliterated roads with great shouting and enthusiasm.

Hildegarde held her own with them, conscious of its vital touch every time Sidney offered her his gloved hand, growing prettier and rosier with every quarter mile.

They had had a formal luncheon, sitting down about twelve at table; it had been three o'clock before they got out into the woods, Hildegarde fortified with a sweater of Helen's and Peggy's sturdy walking shoes, and it was almost five when they got back.

Then suddenly, from being a hilarious and united group, they were all gone. A girl or two into one door, men toward the billiard room, Peggy in flight to her baby, Jay into the library with his father. And then Sidney, as she was quite innocently wondering where everyone had disappeared, and quite unsuspectingly starting for the stairs, caught Hildegarde's hand, and drew her toward the door of a sort of little study, back of the more formal reception rooms and drawing rooms.

"Come in here, Hildegarde," he said, "I want to show you some of my own particular things."

The girl felt her heart begin to beat; her fingers were limp in his; she let herself be drawn into the little room and heard the door close.

It was very quiet in here in the early winter dark. A lamp was lighted, a great mellow lamp that filled the place with a warm apricot glow. There was a wood fire, sunk now to pink ashes, there were books, a few pictures, a great

leather couch with a comfortable fat back was before the fire.

Sweetness of roses, sweetness of violets lingered in the soft air. Above the mantelpiece was the portrait of a slim boy in a riding coat and breeches, with a whip in his hand and two beagles at his knee. Behind him was painted an open window draped with a great balloon of tasselled curtain and showing a misty green woodland. Sidney.

"That was done six or seven years ago, when I was about seventeen," Sidney said as Hildegard walked across the little room and raised her eyes to the canvas. "Do you like it?"

"Well—you look older now!" She dared not look at him. Her hour had come!

"Take off that big sweater, you won't need it in here." He helped her, his big, finely groomed hands shaking a little. "And the hat, too," he said. Sweater and hat were flung into the dim shadows behind them, and Hildegard, in her simple best frock, with its plain linen collar and narrow cuffs making her look not much more than half her twenty years, sank down on the leather couch and looked up at him.

Sidney stood with his back to the fire, one elbow on the mantel, his smiling eyes fixed on hers.

"Hildegard, you look adorable there, in that light! You're the one that ought to be painted."

"My hair's—terrible," the girl murmured, her ten fingers exploring it, fluffing it.

Instantly, without further preamble, he was close beside her, sitting on the edge of the couch so that his body was turned, and he half faced her, earnest, breathless, her hands surprised by both his.

"Hildegard, you know what I want to say to you," he said, and the handsome face she loved, the face whose look of intellect, of race, she knew so well, was shaken with a smile, and the voice whose every accent thrilled her was trembling, too.

"Hildegard—dearest—I want you to be my wife."

He slipped to his knees, at her knee, and locked his arms about her waist, and Hilda pushed the rich wave of hair from his forehead, and drooped her face, with its smiling, questioning eyes, close to his face.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" he asked, in a whisper. "The most beautiful woman in the world!"

"Sidney," she asked, hardly above a breath, "are you sure?"

"Sure," he answered, his eyes riveted to her eyes.

"Your father—your mother?" A backward gesture of the head that was aureoled with gold in the lamplight indicated the great silent house behind her.

"Why, but they *know*, my darling, they love you!" he said tenderly. "Don't—don't hesitate, sweetheart."

Her voice rang out between a laugh and a sob.

"Sidney, why *should* I hesitate?"

"Kiss me," he implored. And Hildegard leaned forward and rested her face against his, and gave him her first, childish brief, kiss.

Afterward, Sidney sat beside her, his arm about her, and they talked. A light rain was pattering, pattering on the terrace just outside the window now, the night was black. But the room where they sat was all cosiness, lamplight, sleepy firelight.

"I'm so happy I can't believe it's all true, Hildegard."

"Yes, and I'm happy, too."

"Happier than you ever were in your life?"

"Oh, much, much happier!"

"Think what it means, Hildegard. I'll graduate in June, and immediately we'll go abroad—or shall we?"

She laughed, deliciously safe in the curve of his arm, her glory of gold hair loosened in a mop on his big shoulder.

"Does it matter? I'd exactly as soon have a flat in Shotwell Street, if you're asking *me*!"

"I believe you would!" he exulted. "But no," he planned, "I think we ought to go abroad for this reason. It fits in better between college and my going into the firm."

"Yes, that's true."

"Europe, then. We'll get lots of clothes and see a few shows in New York."

"New York!"

"Do you like the sound of it?"

"Well, of course, you always think of it as being a place to go!"

"And then we'll sail for London—and after that, Paris, and Switzerland, if Italy is too hot——"

"That—just *finishes* me!" breathed Hilda.

"We'll have six months to get used to it. You know," Sidney added, revelling in confidences, "the other day I asked my brother Jay if it was lots of fun getting engaged and getting married. Well, at first he and Peggy said that it was the greatest fun in the world, that you just couldn't bear the hours to go by, they were so wonderful. Then they said that getting into your own first house was more fun. Then they got perfectly slushy and held hands, and said, 'Oh, but the first anniversary is the thing! The first two years are the wonderful time—when you've really settled down to each other.'"

Hildegarde laughed.

"I can't imagine any one having a more wonderful time than we will have, planning and arranging."

"Imagine when the presents begin to come in! There'll be buckets of them, you know."

"Imagine Christmases and summers—always together!"

"Why, Hilda, the littlest week-end, when we go off in the car, will be a holiday!"

"Ah, won't it, though?"

"And would you love me just as much if I hadn't a cent, darling?"

"Oh, but Sidney," she said with mock seriousness, "I couldn't respect a man of twenty-five who hadn't a cent!"

Again his exultant laugh.

"But the money doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"I don't honestly think——" Hildegarde turned earnest eyes upon him, spoke with grave conscientiousness—"I don't

honestly *think* it does. It never has with me," she added simply. "I've always thought of myself as marrying somebody quite poor, and doing my own work, and perhaps having a general servant, if I had children."

Sidney was looking at her steadily, a light almost of awe in his eyes.

"Hildegarde, do you know how perfectly wonderful you are?"

"Oh, don't say that."

"But I will say it! Do you know what my mother said, the very day she first saw you? You and I were having tea at the St. Francis and she was there, with one of my aunts—Mrs. Craigie."

"Did you know they were there?"

"Oh, yes, I'd been talking to them before you came, and I told them just where to sit so that they could see you. And afterward she said to me, 'Sid, that girl is superb. She's beautiful, she looks an aristocrat, she's noble looking!' That's just what she said. I'll tell you, Hilda, there are pretty girls and nice-looking girls—and then there are queens who look like you! You're simply a queen—you're so soft and yet so straight and slim, and your eyes are set so deep, and your head is held so high—you're always going to set men perfectly crazy! And how proud of you I'll be!"

"Sidney, I suspect that you're in love!"

"You know darned well I'm in love. But anyway, what I meant was that Mother likes you. They all do."

"I can't think why they're so nice to me!" Hildegarde smiled.

"Well, I'll tell you part of it," Sidney said, stretching back luxuriously beside her, flinging a match into the fire, and putting his cigarette to his lips. "Mother loves family—you've got it. The minute I told her that your mother was a Crabtree, and that you were connected with the Brewers of San Rafael, she said, 'I knew it!' Then she believes in love, the real, old-fashioned, blown-in-the-bottle article, always said that that was what she wanted her children to have, and that she'd never stand in their way if they found it. Jay

had a terribly sad love affair before he met Peggy, and I've never had any at all. So as soon as I told Mother about you, she said: 'If she's an American, and a lady, and straight, and loves you as you do her, I thank God for it!' She'd never stand for a split in the family, you know, short of an Eskimo or a two-headed albino. More than that," Sidney finished quite soberly, "she knew that I'd get out in five minutes if she and Dad tried to pull any of the heavy society stuff on me! I can't stand most of the girls of Helen's crowd, and she knows it!"

The sudden change in his manner upset Hildegarde, and she laughed joyously like a child.

"Talk about flats in the Mission!" Sidney resumed truculently, "you and I'd have just as good a time there, if not better. We'd be all by ourselves, and not have a raft of family butting in all the time!"

He flung his finished cigarette into the fire, put his arm about her again, drew her head to his shoulder.

And Hildegarde rested there, not thinking, not worrying, putting all problems and clouds far into the future, content to enjoy the exquisite hour. The fire was almost dead now, but the lamp burned on in a pool of apricot light, and the unseen violets scented the warm air. Outside, they could hear the rain, pattering, pattering on the tiles of the terrace.

Her father and mother knew, but there had only been that one moment of suspicion among the neighbours: never anything definite. Lars knew; she could trust him as herself. At the hospital she was only a faint memory now, she had not even given them her real name there. She had been "Hilda Smith." The Carlsens liked her, they had given the episode no significance, anyway.

There was only one other. And he had melted away into life as these raindrops were dropping—dropping into thirsty earth. He would never hear of her marriage, never identify the beautiful young Mrs. Sidney Penfield with that girl of the houseboat, and the Fourth of July, that little girl of fifteen in her graduation dress, with her young face turned up to the

white summer moon, as were the faces of the butterfly sweet-peas, above the ripple, ripple, ripple of the quietly rising tide.

They were not to tell any one now, for the most delightful of reasons. Mrs. Penfield wanted to take her prospective daughter-in-law in hand first, and see to Hildegarde's wardrobe.

Wardrobe was what she said, but what she really did was far more than merely pick pretty underwear and hats and dresses, and fit Hildegarde to beautiful shoes. She had a dentist see her, sent her to manicure and hairdresser for beautifying, and kept her easily, yet quite steadily and purposely, supplied with good books.

"Did you like Pater?" she would ask animatedly, when she took Hildegarde to the occasional luncheon that the girl came almost to dread. "Didn't like him? Better than Ruskin, was he? Here's a book you ought to know—Stevenson's. Take it—I meant it for you. By the way, Hildegarde, do you know Shelley at all, or Keats? You should."

More and more impressed with the strange importance of her destiny, and able at last to indulge the hunger for improvement that had marked her nature from its very babyhood, Hildegarde proved to be a docile subject for the older woman's vigorous pruning and seeding. She listened, absorbed, she experimented during every conscious instant of her day.

"Some women dislike their son's wives on principle," Mrs. Penfield said to her one day. "They act disagreeably at the time of the marriage, they get everyone talking—merely to satisfy a sort of jealousy, I suppose! Then, months, or perhaps years, afterward, they have a grand reconciliation, and one hears them saying that Jim's wife is one of the dearest girls in the world. I work just the other way, Hildegarde," Mrs. Penfield added, with a significant smile. "Nobody's going to tell *me* that Sidney's wife is a lovely woman—I'm going to find it out first for myself, and give the public absolutely nothing to chew on!"

It went deeper than that, although this was true. Hildegard was quite shrewd enough to see that the older son's wife, the impeccable Peggy, who had been a Paget of Boston, was not particularly malleable material in her mother-in-law's hands.

Peggy aristocratically and confidently managed her own affairs; sometimes Peggy's daring, as a young wife, infinitely exceeded the older Mrs. Penfield's ideals. But that was not the rub.

The rub came when it was Peggy who was a little surprised, a little shocked at the Western laxity of her husband's home, when it was Peggy who elevated eyebrows, and permitted her proud mouth a slightly scornful smile.

When Peggy said: "So Linda's young man stayed until after midnight, and she let him out herself, did she? I think that's quite delicious! What do they pay the butler for, by the way?" Hildegard knew that Mrs. Penfield senior could gladly have slapped her son's young wife. It was all a game, after all, the game of lineage and decorum and convention, and what was "done," and what was "not done," and Peggy played the game quite as well as Mrs. Penfield did, if not better.

Peggy's comment upon various trivial matters puzzled Hildegard at first, until she came to see that nothing this chiselled personality encountered was really touched, was really a part of Peggy. Everything was met by Peggy's attitude, and it was, socially speaking, the correct attitude.

"Oh, how wonderful, and how naughty of him!" was Peggy's comment upon a great English painter's portrait of her father-in-law. Hildegard, who chanced to be present with the family when the great canvas was first shown, glanced at her questioningly. But Peggy had no eyes except for the picture. "How deliciously wicked!" she murmured again.

And Hildegard saw, to her amazement, that this phrase made the older Mrs. Penfield a little uneasy, and noted that more than one of the group of cousins and aunts took Peggy's

cue, and murmured amusedly: "Of course, it's wonderful—but one sees that it's just a little bit mischievous, doesn't one, Minna?"

So that to have her younger son's wife a creature of her own forming might be an infinitely more satisfying thing to Mrs. Penfield than even to have Sidney follow his brother's example, and marry a Paget of Boston, Hildegard mused. She was a woman who loved authority, who loved to be respected, quoted, admired, and in whose hands Hildegard's eagerness to learn and to improve was as so much wax.

Even seeing this, the girl liked Peggy better than Sidney's own sister, Helen. Helen was an even more pronounced type, a nervous, jealous, restless type; Peggy was assured of her position, and had made her marital bargain upon excellent terms. Helen was supposedly engaged to a young Eastern man, but it was not announced, and one day Sidney proudly and amusedly told Hildegard that he had overheard Helen asking her mother that she, Hildegard, should not meet Mr. Choate until matters between him and Helen herself were settled.

"But, Sidney," Hildegard said, flushing proudly, "why not?"

"You fisherman!"

"No, honestly, I'm not fishing!"

"Well, then, of course, it's because you're—well, not so homely as all that comes to!" Sidney said, laughing.

"Oh, but look here," the girl said impatiently. "Looks aren't so important as that!"

"Well, it is important. Not so much to me, because I know what a darling you are. But if you could hear them talking about you! They say that the minute Miss Sessions comes into a room, all the women look commonplace!"

"I could listen to this sort of thing indefinitely," Hildegard said, looking down at her tea cup, and dimpling.

"I tell you, Hildegard, when I see you, with your yellow hair, and the way you hold your head, and your blue eyes, among them all—well, I understand the way they feel!" Sidney finished simply.

"Well, I expect *you* to! I expect you at least to get the thrill I get when I see that belted coat, and you jerk off your hat and smile at me. It seems to me then—let me pour it out and start over, it's cool!—it seems to me then that all the girls who aren't going to marry you aren't being treated fairly!"

"Here's where you get kissed, right in the St. Francis tea room," Sidney laughed joyfully.

"Yes, you try it once!"

"There are girls who would let me!"

"Well, then, next Friday, suppose you take one to tea for a change? I have some things to do——"

"Mother says you remind her of a little swan, Hildegard. So white and gold and dignified—swimming along alone."

The girl's eyes flashed with amusement and pleasure.

"That was a cute thing for her to say about me!"

"She likes you," Sidney stated for the thousandth time, as if he could not assure himself of it often enough. "She says you are one of the finest girls she ever knew."

"I suppose it's part of being engaged to drink in this sort of thing and believe it's all true."

"Well, don't you like it?"

"I adore it!"

"Mother," the man said, "adores *fineness*. She hates anything vulgar or coarse, loves self-control and silence and all that sort of thing! She told me the other day that you could be silent more intelligently, more vitally, I think she said, than any girl she had ever seen."

"That was another nice thing for her to say!"

"She meant it. And you know, Peggy," Sidney resumed, with his big grin that had something of a boy's wickedness in it, "Peggy, for all her airs, isn't especially self-controlled. She'll burst out crying, or scold at Jay—not often, but now and then. She had a maid once who stole—or was *supposed* to have stolen—a ring Peggy's father—that's Alden Paget of Boston—had given her, and Peggy made an awful scene and fired the girl. Later, my mother found the ring caught in the flounce of a silk petticoat or something that Peg had given

her for a rummage sale, and—I've always remembered this!—Peggy got very red, and she said quickly, 'Of course, that wretched Maggie was quite smart enough to put it there, I'm not in the least taken in by *that*.'

"I think that's awful!" Hildegard was quite pale.

"Well, of course, they *do* steal, and I suppose for every once that one of them is wrongly accused, a hundred go free!" Sidney suggested easily. "But what made me laugh was to see Peggy get wrought up to the point where she couldn't really pull herself together! But she's a dear, just the same," he added loyally, "she's all right. Only, I would say that you were naturally fine," Sidney went on, quite seriously, and speaking slowly, "that you *couldn't* do a thing that was mean or small or bad, and that Peggy is only what her governesses and teachers have made her."

Was this her moment for confession? She felt her mouth fill with salt water and her spine turn cold. The hand that rested on the little tea table shook.

Was this the time to say: "Sidney, I'm twenty now, and I *am* trying to be fine. I *am* pure, in my soul. But years ago, when I was only a little girl of fifteen, when I didn't know anything about life, because nobody—*nobody* had taught me anything!—then I wasn't fine. Then I fell in love, suddenly, as a girl does, and I didn't know enough to say 'no,' to save myself for this hour—for the hour when I should give myself to you!"

Her throat was thick, she felt the blood pressing behind her ears. The moment ticked away. He was looking at her, through the blur of her own violent feeling, he was smiling.

"A penny for your thoughts, Miss Sessions! Why, you were miles away, weren't you? All the wisdom of the Nile in your look."

"Nothing," she said confusedly, with a dry mouth, with a thick-beating heart. "I was—— But it was nothing!"

"Shall you like to see the Nile some day, travelling with your husband?"

"Ah, shan't I!" Her colour came back again. She would see the Nile, Mrs. Sidney Penfield, travelling with her hus-

band. How improbable, how unthinkable it was, that a second-rate stock actor, one of a hundred thousand drifting loose in the great country, could ever move to throw a shadow over a future as bright as that?

But, oh, if she had not done it—if she had not done it—if she had not done it! The old sin flamed, and waned, and flamed and waned like a threatening fire in the background of all her thoughts. Now dim and insignificant, now glowing and angry over all her sky, which was its rightful measure in her own eyes, and which would be its measure in Sidney's?

Sometimes she was feverish with anxiety, feverish with fear and doubt. Sometimes she could put the whole thing behind her and forget it for a few brief hours of happiness. But always it loomed again, more terrible for the respite.

The Carlsens and Lars; her mother and father, the suspicious neighbours. These she need not fear. The hospital attendants who had cared for an insignificant girl upon a Christmas Eve almost five years ago. And one more—

But even suppose him to be back some day in San Francisco, and to learn of her marriage, would Norman Montgomery necessarily betray her? Why should he? He had loved her, if only for a few days; why should he want to harm her?

In any case, he was *not* back in San Francisco, and the probability of their ever meeting again was so remote that a little clear thinking, a little argument with herself, always sufficed to dismiss it.

But it would come creeping back again—creeping back again. . . .

In her fear of greater revelations, she found it easy to speak honestly with Sidney about her relatives.

"My mother was always telling us that we were little ladies and gentlemen, but I assure you anything less like the one's idea of a refined atmosphere for children——!"

"This was in Los Angeles?"

"No, they moved there later."

"They'll come up for our wedding, of course?"

"I don't think so, and your mother agrees with me. You see I left home after a bitter quarrel with my father, Sid——"

"What about? I don't see you quarrelling with anybody!"

"I was hardly more than a child. I walked out of the house, got a job, and haven't been in touch with them since. And I don't see," Hildegard went on, frowning faintly, "what good it would do to establish relations again. I thought that sometime after we were married I would write my mother, perhaps from Europe, and tell her that I had married, and then afterward, if they did come up, we'd be nice to them, of course! But my mother was very delicate. . . ."

He was watching her sympathetically; it was impossible to believe that the wonderful deep blue eyes had ever been angry, that the nobility and beauty of the whole fine young face had ever lent themselves to ill-temper.

"I'd like to see you mad, Hilda!" he said, grinning.

"You probably will. Although," said Hildegard, sighing, "I don't get angry very often now. I think it's—childish."

"I wish Peggy could hear you. She'd ~~d~~writhe!" Sidney chuckled. "You came up to this toy shop—what's-his-name's place."

"To Carlsen's Bazaar, yes. They were wonderful to me. I had a darling little clean room, lots to eat, and they never bothered me. And I was there until I came to Mrs. Warner. So there you have me, Bertha the Little Sewing Machine Girl!" she finished, laughing.

"The Virtuous Chorus Girl, or Smarter Than She Knew!" Sidney capped it.

"But, seriously," Hildegard presently said, "I think that if I had it all to do over again, I wouldn't leave home. I'd stick out the storm until my father forgave me, and finish my Institute course, and become a teacher."

So presented, it sounded credible enough. There was no suspicion in Sidney's eye.

"I blame your father entirely! A man ought to have better sense than to fight with his own little girl."

"My father drank, you see. And he would go perfectly insane when he had been drinking."

"I know. It doesn't make anybody any more reasonable. And your mother was delicate?"

"Very delicate."

"Well, then, you had to have servants—a nurse to look out for her?"

"Servants! Listen to him. No, we never had servants. My mother directed things from her chair, I did the marketing, everybody helped—the one thing that would have thrown us all into utter confusion would have been a servant!"

"Hildegarde, what a little darling you must have been! I can see you, with a big apron on, cooking with blue pots——"

"It wasn't so very picturesque!" But she laughed as she said it, and Sidney continued to think that it must have been. With her straight little shoulders and flying mop of gold, her stubborn little cleft chin and eager feet, such a child would make any home a Paradise.

And so things drifted along to Christmas time, and into the New Year. It was almost mid-January, and Hildegarde had said to herself a thousand times that her marriage would be "this year—this year—this year!" when one day Pidgy, making up her face in a hot little dressing room at the Alcazar, said casually:

"Remember those Montgomerys in Belvedere—the place you and I met each other?"

Hilda was free this afternoon. She had drifted over to Pidgy's dressing room quite by chance, willing to show the older girl that in the new, unbelievably brilliant dream of her engagement, a dream that was becoming more and more a reality, and that was suspected on all sides, even though she would not admit it, she still loyally held to the old friends.

Pidgy was leaning forward, pressing red paint on her lips. Hilda sat frozen to her chair, suffocating, choking, motionless.

"Remember that nephew of theirs?—Darn this stuff, it's all melted," Pidgy muttered. "Hilda, look in that box, will you? See if there's a stick of red there. In the first place," she went on, with a sort of angry vigour, "in the first place,

Laura swiped my stuff—she went over to Oakland last night, and when I came in it was gone. Lissen, that's the boy—what'd he call——”

The little room was packed with bright hard light, every dingy detail clear and hard: grease pots, rabbits' feet, powder pads gray and lifeless, rouge, brushes, scattered pins and hairpins. Slippers and scarfs and petticoats, twisted silk stockings, mirrors—mirrors—mirrors.

Hildegarde fixed her eyes upon a sheaf of heavy, discoloured artificial roses, the fine rubber tubing of their twisted stems broken to show the bare wire underneath. “Oh, my God!” she said in her soul, over and over again. “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!”

“Norman Montgomery, that's his name,” Pidgy said. “I don't know whether he's with them or not. But they were asking for you to-day.”

CHAPTER XXII

ON A Sunday evening, two days later, he walked into Moretti's while they were having dinner. A little later than Hildegard's crowd, he came in at half-past seven, accompanied by a young actor named Bob Fox.

She had not dared ask if he was with his aunt and uncle; she had not mentioned his name at all. Hildegard, like a rabbit in a snake's cage, had not dared to move through these terrible two days. But the uncertainty was over now. Here he was.

A dark, rather coarse-looking young man, with that air of arrogant easiness and conscious beauty so characteristic of his type. He was almost romantic in the sweep of his general gesture of greeting, the negligent acknowledgment of Fox's introductions.

Hildegard had her favourite seat, the squared leather-padded corner into which the long table was wedged; she could not get up, she raised unsmiling eyes, stretched out her hand.

"Hello!" Norman said, with his first flash of naturalness, of eagerness. "How are you?"

"Know each other, huh?" Bob Fox asked.

The girl could not answer, she hoped that she was smiling, she hoped that she was not going to faint.

There was a hospitable bustle of making room, pushing knives and forks about, tightening chairs. Luis brought back the pallid, greasy salmi, the sardines, the chopped sour beets. Thick plates, thick cuts of fresh, sour bread, thin red wine in thick, smudged glasses.

Coarse-looking, hard, conceited. Showing off——

"Hilda, it's great to see you again! Asked for you the very first thing."

"Pidgy Warner told me that your uncle and aunt were here. But she wasn't sure that you were."

It was her own voice speaking, but she hardly recognized it. The room was brightly lighted, filled with small tables, except for their own long one. At their table a few of the newspaper boys were muttering and crumbling bread, a few of the girls from the Tivoli were yawning, Lars Carlsen, his mop of fair hair falling over his forehead, was drawing some sort of design on a card for the benefit of an intent old man with whiskers and strong glasses. Two stout middle-aged women, rouged, kindly faced, fat, falsely blonde of hair, actresses of a past generation, communed confidentially and tenderly over their *minestrone*.

The happy, happy crowd: the young professionals of the city, actors, writers, dancers, newspaper men. Hildegard wondered if any one among them had ever carried the terror, the sick fear, that weighed on her heart to-night.

"Go on, Jim, your club speech! Go on, Jim!"

Jim Groat, nicest of all the newspaper men, was on his feet, his curly close red cap of tight curls shining under the light.

"Madame President, Members and Guests of the Fewer and Better Husbands Club——"

"Gosh, how he gets the voice!"

"Go on, Jim, about the message!"

"—and I think our dear visitor to-day will give you her own message. It's a message we all of us need, and one, I'm sure, that we will carry away with us——"

"Shut up! Let him finish it!"

"Get up, Selby, he introduced you—you have to make a speech. The Japanese Ambassador will now address you."

"Oh, I berry prease to speak to good Japponese scooraboy. I go to scoora in Jappan, but berry prease you go scoora here——"

"I move we kill the Japanese schoolboy!"

"Hildegard, come on. Sing the scared little girl's song."

"I will not."

"You will, too. Say 'Excuse me, Papa.'"

"I can't to-night, Tom—honestly. Look at all the people that are in here!"

"They'd love it."

"But I'm tired, truly I am."

"The story goes," said Tom O'Connor, sitting next to her, "that Hildegard Sessions, spinster, is running with the swells down the Peninsula, and that anything may be expected of her, at any given moment! Said Hildegard Sessions depones——"

He was a light-hearted Irishman, more than half in love with her. It was with genuine consternation now that he felt her slim warm fingers, lightly dropped against his own, press them in appeal and entreaty, and that his quick, concerned glance discovered a suspicious brightness of tears in her eyes.

"What's the matter, Hilda dear?" he asked, when the conversation had risen to a very storm of noise and laughter without their help, and he could speak to her unheard.

"Nothing. Just tired, I guess," she answered, with a quick look and with trembling lips.

"Hildegard, whatever's worrying you will be all the same this time next year!" Tom O'Connor reminded her.

"I suppose so." But the beautiful face did not brighten; he could not win her from her sadness to-night.

"Say, O'Connor," Lars Carlsen said suddenly, "let me sit there next to Hilda, will you? I've got something to talk to her about."

"I like the gall. I was sitting here at half-past five, with my little nose flattened against the pane, waiting for her."

"I'll flatten your little nose!" Lars said impatiently, half shouldering his big way in. He sat down beside her, began to tell her in an undertone that Wat Brown had actually made the change in the social editorship at last, and wanted to see her.

And all the time Norman Montgomery was opposite her, talking, prevaricating, showing off. He did not often address her, but she knew that not one word, one glance of hers, escaped him.

His presence seemed to bulk in the bright, noisy room like a blot, like some monstrous shadow. She did not have to look at him to feel that blackness pressing against her eyelids, keeping her gaze lowered, and her heart in her throat.

Presently they would have to talk, they two. Presently they would be alone, somehow—somewhere—and they would talk.

Should she run away? No, but she couldn't run away from this—no woman could, no woman ever had escaped this hour of reckoning.

"Well, I've got to go." Lars looked at his watch, slipped it back in his pocket, got to his feet. O'Connor would walk with him. The others were drifting away; it was almost nine o'clock.

Norman came around to the empty chair beside her, sipping his black coffee, still talking magnificently, the newcomer, and therefore the attended member of the group.

"Going anywheres, Hilda?" This was Pidgy, heavy with fatigue and hot food, across the table.

"I don't think so. We've got an awful day to-morrow—all those 'Geisha' costumes simply tumbled in the middle of the floor. And Casey's ill, you know; all I have is her daughter, Katie Keane, and she's absolutely no good."

Norman was comfortable in the chair somebody's departure had left empty beside her. Hildegard went on with her deliberate mixing of cheese and butter and seasonings, spread the paste upon crackers, extended one on a knife-tip to Bob Fox.

"Do I get any of that?" Norman asked.

She sent him a glance from heavy blue eyes, lowered her lashes again, and without a word lifted a second cracker, and gave it to him as she had to Bob.

"You kinder keep an eye on all of the boys, don't you, Hilda?" Norman said, with a hint of admiration in his voice.

To this she could make no reply. Her throat was thick, and she felt the blood beating behind her ears. She looked about the room desperately.

"Does it seem terribly hot in here to you, Pidgy?"

"Roasting."

"Leave the door open a few minutes, will you?" Norman said to the waiter. "Or open a window."

"I don't know why we're sitting here," Pidgy said, with a frank yawn, laying her arms down upon the almost-deserted table, and her face on them. "I've got to get to bed. I'm rehearsing to-morrow."

In the corner of the room some of the lights had been already extinguished; most of the tables were cleared. Morretti's kept open all night, but only a third of it was lighted between nine and eleven o'clock.

"I've got to go," Bob Fox confessed, glancing at his watch.

"How about you and Hildegard coming down to the Palace with me for some ginger ale, and we could watch the dancing?" Norman suggested.

Hildegard's head went up.

"Oh, not the Palace, I think!" she said quickly, almost fearfully, and as if to herself. The Palace meant only Sidney.

"Wherever you say!" Norman promised gallantly.

"Well, I say home," Pidgy answered sleepily.

"How 'bout you, Hilda?" the man asked.

She looked at him steadily, looked down again at her own hands linked loosely before her upon the spotted cloth.

"Suppose we sit here and talk for a while?" she said, with difficulty.

"Oh, this is a cheesy place," Norman protested.

Hildegard moved her eyes apathetically to his face.

"But I'm tired, and I've had this dress and hat on all day and everything," she offered lifelessly.

"You come home with me," Pidgy directed, loyally attempting to save her chum from what must be an unwelcome tête-à-tête. Many times before this had the girls protected each other. Norman Montgomery was unmistakably a bore, a handsome, stupid, selfish bore. Hildegard didn't like his type at all, the dancing, flirting, boasting type.

But Pidgy was amazed that Hildegard did not rise to the chance of escape to-night. Instead, marshalling crumbs into

a line with a lazy fork handle, she said, without looking up:

"Have Bob take you home, Pidge, and I'll sit here a few minutes and then follow you."

"Mama'll raise the roof if you're later than ten!" Pidge warned her, rising somewhat reluctantly, but too thoroughly overpowered with sleep and weariness to protest the arrangement.

"We'll be right along!" Hildegard smiled at the waiter, who was gathering glasses and plates. Her eyes swept the room indifferently. Mirrors covered with flourishes of soap; small tables upon which the limp white cloths stood somewhat awry. A few later dinners beginning with the *anti-paste* and *minestrone*. And at the end of the room, in a dazzling bath of light, the street doorway and the desk, the cash register, the cigar stand, the big windows in which a few apples and loaves of bread were stored rather than displayed.

"Pidge's pretty," Norman remarked when he and Hildegard were alone at the end of the long table. The girl leaned back in her corner, her shoulders against the padded red leather cushioning of the bench and the mirrors. Norman, to face her, turned himself partly about and rested his elbow on the table. There was plenty of scattered light in the room, but this end of the table was in partial shadow. Hildegard's serious eyes, under the additional shadow of her hat brim, sparkled like sapphires in the softened glow.

"Oh, she's very pretty!"

"I thought you used not to like her, Hilda?"

A pause. Then Hildegard lowered her lashes, shrugged.

"I don't have to ask you how you are," Norman said. "It seems to me you're prettier than ever. Tell me what you've been doing all this time."

Again she was silent. But she had glanced up at him briefly, now, and Norman, twisting his thick wineglass stem slowly in his big fingers, and watching her beautiful face with appreciation, was content to wait.

"I left home that fall, after you went away. And for a while I worked in a toy shop, in Fillmore Street," she said simply, after the silence. "Then, one day, I met Pidge

down-town, and she took me to a rehearsal at the Central. She and her mother were wonderful to me, and she got me the job I have now—only they didn't pay me so well at first. I got to know the crowd. The newspaper and theatre people all come here for dinner," Hildegard diverged, glancing about the restaurant, "and we have pretty good times."

"I always said you'd make good—knew it!" Norman assured her flatteringly.

She looked at him unsmilingly, bit her lip slightly.

"Never forgot you, you knew that!" the man said.

He was quite obviously without any regrets, any self-consciousness, any shame. Hildegard made no comment. Her eyes moved furtively to and fro. This talk, at the littered, deserted table, presumably couldn't last for ever.

"And now you want to know what's been happening to me," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Well, I guess there's a good deal of gipsy blood in the Montgomerys—we got to keep moving. It didn't matter to me what salary they offered me. . . ."

How he was enjoying it, the lazy talk about just one person—himself. Managers had pursued him with contracts, the honours of every first night had gone to him.

Stouter. Coarser. She had often wondered if they two would ever come face to face again; she had never imagined that it might be in a fashion quite so commonplace as this. Herself pinned into the corner, in the dimmed light of the restaurant; Norman sometimes smoking a cigarette, sometimes hooking thumbs in the armholes of his vest, leaning back luxuriously against the padded wall, taking out greased and much-folded papers to prove to her his importance and his affiliations.

"But there's one thing I know you want to know," he said finally, grinding out his fourth cigarette. He leaned nearer, dropped his heavy face so that it was close to her own. "You want to know if I ever forgot my little girl in California," he said, with a certain deliberately acknowledged emotion. "Will you believe me, Hilda? This is God's truth. . . ."

He had been drinking the sour, light wine, his breath was

thick with it. Hildegard shrank back a little in her corner, her eyes widening, her lips parted on uneven breathing. He was not drunk. But the wine had warmed him into a mood of maudlin sentimentality, of revolting tenderness.

Norman Montgomery back. Norman Montgomery returned to San Francisco and already making love to her. The girl felt that she could tear herself to pieces in the sudden rage and despair that possessed her as she tried to make herself believe it.

Hildegard, suffocating, looked about the room. She had wept and prayed for one more hour with this man, for one more talk with him. Her sick eyes had sought him about every street corner, had seen him in every stranger who swung off a street car or stepped out of an elevator doorway. Norman, Norman, Norman—her heart had cried out, back and forth, back and forth, like the clapper in a bell—Norman, where are you? Why don't you write to me? Why don't you come back?

Now, here he was. Here he was, after five long years, fatter, softer, coarser, but the same man. There was an ugly blotching about the lower part of his full face, made darker by the springing growth of heavy beard. Perhaps he had shaved this morning, perhaps last night, Hilda thought; at all events, he had not shaved recently enough to look groomed.

She thought of Sidney's fresh, firm, youthful face, his clean eyes, the finished beauty of his firm big hand, the conscious integrity and intelligence of his whole bearing. There was a fragrance, a young hardness about Sidney, the fragrance of youth and health, the hardness of the self-controlled, alert, and vigorous athlete.

Sidney. Oh, if he could come in that door, in his belted overcoat, with violets in his hand, and his keen, fine eyes seeking for her. She could not breathe the air this other man breathed, nor live within the sound of his thick, lazy voice.

"Norman—I've got to go. It's twenty minutes to ten!"

"You *do* b'lieve that, Hilda?" he persisted, looking up hazily. "You never thought I'd forgotten you?"

"Oh, no—no. That's—that's all over, Norman! We needn't think of that any more."

"*This isn't over,*" he said affectionately, drawing her hand under his arm and walking close to her in the dark street, "that I think you're the prettiest girl I ever saw."

O'Farrell Street. Eddy Street. They were nearly home. The girl raised patient eyes to the stars, looked about her as if stifling. Ellis Street. Nearly home.

In the dark apartment-house doorway he delayed her; Hildegard felt that she would be ill if he did not loose her arm.

"Say, aren't you going to say good-night to me like you would an old friend?"

"If you mean kiss you——" She was breathless, trying to laugh, trying to loosen her arms, trying to pretend it was all funny. "Certainly not! I don't kiss anybody."

"Oh, well, look here—look here—look here!" he protested genially and unalarmedly. His big paws held her, kept her facing him. Hildegard dropped her head, squared her shoulders like a little animal at bay.

"Norman—for heaven's sake!—here are people coming!"

There really were people coming, with noise and circumlocution and rustling, down in the elevator and across the hall, and to her relief he let her go for the one second she needed. In the next she was in the elevator, saying a casual "Good-night."

He came after her, stood in the hall looking at her, baffled and angry. The coloured elevator boy waited at the switch, motionless, expressionless, apathetic.

"I suppose there's some good reason why I can't come up?"

"Good reason! Mrs. Warner sleeps in the parlour, Norman. It would upset her for days to wake her up and bundle her into our room."

The annunciator buzzed; someone calling on the seventh floor.

"All right, go ahead, Sam," Hildegard said. And with another good-night to Norman she was borne out of sight.

She let herself in with a latchkey; the parlour was not lighted, but in the streams of brightness from the street below she could make out the form of Mrs. Warner, heavily sleeping on the couch.

"That you, Hilda?" Pidgy called from the room beyond. Hildegard cautiously engineered her way through the bulky shadows that were furniture, slipped into the apartment she shared with Pidgy, and instantly began to undress.

Pidgy was working with her hair, her thin draggled pink silk nightgown showing under a soiled kimono. The room was brightly lighted, hot, close. The wide bed had been turned down, and Pidgy's night gloves flung on her crumpled, limp pillow.

Hildegard took off her hat and coat, hung them up, sat down to reach back to her heels and pull off her shoes, pulled her dress over her head and found a hanger for it. She began to take hairpins out of her hair, and presently shook it loose about her white and tired face.

"You look dead," said Pidgy then.

"I am dead." But she said it without evidencing any particular emotion. She stood up to step out of a ring of clothes on the floor, and stretched her young body luxuriously in its cotton chemise. Suddenly, with a rending sigh, she sank into a chair, and knotting her fingers in her tawny mane, dropped her head on her knees.

"Get into bed; you can't rest that way," Pidgy said, with a sympathetic glance.

Lights. Lights. And it was so hot! Hildegard, looking up suddenly, like a Hottentot in a bush of wild hair, gauged Pidgy's progress with burning eyes. Only about five minutes more of this, and they might have the blessed darkness.

She went with forced energy to the washstand, her exquisite apricot skin emerging from the soap and hot water with its old baby freshness, its exquisite dewy bloom. She bound her thick mane with pins, got into her nightgown, and was in bed, lying straight, staring at the ceiling.

"Cold cream, Hilda?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, tell me—how was your beau to-day?"

Hildegard straightened herself on an elbow, looked tired and puzzled at the other girl.

"You mean—oh, you mean Sidney?"

Pidgy wound a string of hair about a rubber, scowled in the mirror.

"Well, I certainly didn't mean that lemon Montgomery! Say, how does he get that way, Hildegard? It seems to me he's changed terribly. Don't you remember he used to be a nice sort of kid?"

Hildegard was staring at the brightly lighted ceiling, where a few awakened flies were moving languidly. She did not speak.

"I had a real good bath; for once, there was hot water!" Pidgy said. "You could have Montgomery to-morrow, Hilda. I never saw such a crush! He gives me an awful pain, but I like Bob Fox, don't you? How were the Penfields?"

"Lovely!" She said it in a tone of bitter tragedy, remembering just how extremely lovely they had been, remembering the white beds, the big airy rooms, the order and silence, the spaciousness, the gentle voices and hospitable ways.

She spent almost every Sunday with them now. To-day had been soft and sunshiny, with new grass up, and the first wild violets under the oaks. At noon the air had been deliciously warm; but the afternoon had been chilly, and she and Sidney had spent two wonderful hours in the little study, talking—talking, listening to the general stir of voices and music in the family sitting room beyond the open door.

He had never seemed so dear, so much her own, as to-day, when the menace of Norman's return had made Hildegard feel that she needed Sidney so pitifully! Needed championship, reassurance, backing, needed to know that he would love the woman, whatever the girl had been!

Not daring to tell him, yet she had been so quiet, so dependent upon him to-day that he had suspected something wrong, and had spent all their happy hours together trying to brighten her mood, trying to comfort her.

"Hildegarde, you're so adorable when you're like this! What's happened?"

"Nothing—exactly. But I think—I think I feel a little sad to-day."

"Sad? Why, January's almost gone, and February's spring! It's only twenty weeks to June, Hilda—that isn't so long, and I'll pick you out of all those worries, and you shan't ever be sad again!"

"I know you want to, Sidney. But this is one of the days when it doesn't seem right to let you."

"All right, talk your little head off. It won't make any difference in the long run."

"You're so confident, Sidney. But there *is* a difference between us—between 'Broadhall' and Turk Street, and the way we dress and talk and use our knives and forks."

"But, darling, you're going to dress in all the lovely things I buy you and talk to me. And as for knives and forks—well, we're just fooling, of course," Sidney had said, with a little reddening of his clean-cut cheeks, "but don't you ever say anything about my wife's manners, for she's the most beautifully mannered woman I ever saw—and I'm not the only one that says it, either!"

Oh, why, why couldn't she have said to him then, bravely and simply, "Sidney, something has come up just lately that worries me—I've got to talk to you about it. It's going to make you feel differently about me—but I can't believe it will stop you loving me!"

Fear had closed her lips. Suppose he made a scene, suppose she began to cry, suppose his mother came in——

So she had been silent until his mother really did come in, in the careless way that was yet always so timely, so ordered, and until Sidney had said:

"Sit still, Hildegarde. Look at her, Mother, with that lamp behind her head. I've been feasting my eyes on her!"

And the moment had vanished. Presently it had been time to bundle up, to take her place beside him for the half-hour's run into town, through the cooling, late afternoon. She couldn't tell him then, couldn't shout it into the teeth of

the dark and cold, and again the chance—if it had been a chance—vanished. He had left her at her door and gone back to San Mateo, and she and Pidgy had drifted to Moretti's at about seven o'clock, half an hour before Norman had come in.

And now it was after ten, and the room was suffocating, and brazen with lights, and she could not think.

But after a while Pidgy snapped off the switch and got into bed, and Hildegarde, as usual, sprang out again to open the window.

"Oh, Hildegarde, I always forget it!"

"No matter." The cold night air, wet and sweet, rushed in, the curtains ballooned wildly, writhed against cornices and ceiling. Hildegarde tempered the draught, padded about in the blocks of odd darkness and comparative light, pinning up the curtains, drawing great breaths of fresh air, as the stale air, scented with cold cream and lemon, rushed out.

She knelt at the sill, staring down into Turk Street. The fog was stealing softly in, walls of it, blocks of it. Out at the Cliff House and along the water front the horns and bells would be droning and clanging all night.

Through an open window, across the court, came the jangle of a piano, gushes of red light. A man's voice, singing, "I care not for the stars that shine"—then silence. Then the piano and a burst of laughter again.

Not many persons coming and going in the street; it was an unfriendly night, cold and misty, and those who did go by went fast, women almost running in the grip of their escorts' arms, voices oddly muffled and distorted in the creeping, enveloping, silent fog.

The light on the corner became an orange blur; the drug-store bottles sent streamers of orange and ultramarine blue into the milky veils that were doubling and re-doubling, unwinding, rising, wavering.

Suppose that one were out at—say, Baker's Beach, where the long line of shallow rocks went out—out to the ocean, into a world that would be all fog, all fog and silently swelling

sea. Cold, clean green water—bubbling up, up. The uncertain ground under one's feet, that rough ground sensed only by rocky stumbles in the cold wet dark, would seem to fall away, rather than the eager water to rise; presently the ground would be gone, there would be just blind wild depths beneath one, no rocks, no sand, no solidity, and the triumphant water would be shouting, hammering, racing in every direction at once. Plunging, grasping, doubling in the roaring bottomless darkness and wind and fog, even if one fought for life—how long would that last?

Ah, only a few minutes—only a fraction of the time she had already spent here at the window, thinking about it, looking down into the gently blundering fog that was curling, booming noiselessly into Turk Street.

“Oh, my God, if I had not done it!” she said, deep in her heart. Across the vista of five crowded years, how brief that one fatal night in Belvedere seemed, that pitiful, blinded night when she had dreamed a dream of flags and stars and swinging ropes of paper lanterns against the moon, and the ripple, ripple of the incoming tide. “Oh, my God, if I could undo it!”

Norman Montgomery, with her letters, with her secret. Sidney. Sidney direct and clean and straight and proud. Norman.

Her head ached, she rested her hot face against the window sill, sneezed, and drew her wrapper about her.

It couldn't be—it couldn't be that that old sin was going to come into her life again, was going to kill all her happiness and bring her brave hopes down in anguish and despair? It couldn't be that Sidney would let that one childish error count now?

Must she tell him? There was no one whose advice she could ask. Mrs. Warner? But neither Pidgy nor Pidgy's mother had ever dreamed that there had been a chapter like that in Hildegarde's girlhood. They were conventional, under the theatrical air of carelessness, they would not think it at all a negligible thing.

Lars Carlsen? But she knew what he would think. He would say that Sidney—however pure he might be among men—probably had far more to confess in this particular direction than she, and that in neither case was it particularly important, and that the man who won a sweet and good and beautiful woman of twenty for his wife might well afford to forget anything that had happened to her five years before.

And but for Norman's reappearance Hildegard herself might have taken this attitude and gone on into her brilliant marriage with only an occasional dim thought and pitiful memory of long ago.

But she could not do that now. She must take Norman into account now. Not the black-headed, eager, passionate boy at whose side she had stared up at the stars over Belvedere, but the bloated, dull, heavy egotist that was the Norman to-day.

Hildegard was accustomed to men and their admiration at twenty; almost every week saw some fresh conquest added to her indifferent list. She knew just how a boy would look at her as he said: "Pleased to meet you, Miss Sessions," just how quickly that casual look would deepen into an amazed, "She's pretty," just when—perhaps after only one evening at Moretti's, one single evening of music and laughter and companionship—he would be hers, body and soul, bound in the tones of her voice and the glances of her eyes, eager to follow that fair head of hers anywhere, longing to have the city burn down that he might rush into her room and rescue her and die at her feet.

And she had seen, and had been heartsick to see, something of this in Norman Montgomery's pompous, easy air of proprietorship to-night.

Her knotted arms were on the window sill, her head buried in them, she was writhing, wrestling silently with her soul.

Not to have had it happen! Not to have had it happen!
Not to have had it happen!

To be able to go back. To be able to live just that one brief hour over again.

No, nobody ever could do that. Time didn't come back. There was no retracing of those footsteps. Years, years of agony would not wipe it out now.

She would have given years, she thought. She would have delayed her marriage to Sidney five years, with all that meant of waiting, of happiness deferred, to have come to him clean at the end of them.

Too late. It was too late now. She loved Sidney; she loved beauty and goodness and intelligence and refinement. And Norman had come back to shut the door of her Paradise in her face.

"If I could cry——" she whispered aloud.

Norman had come back, the incarnation of the old sin, its living evidence and reminder. The shame of it—the sordid wretched ugliness of it, as he held it in his memory! Hildegard felt that she could have torn herself bodily to pieces, thinking about it, could have cut it out of her being with her own hands, although it meant plunging the knife into her heart.

This man, vain and dull, needing a shave, eternally smirking his complacent smirk, knew that of her which made him her master. Brooding above the fog-wrapped city, in the deepening quiet of the black Sunday night, Hildegard thought that she could understand now why women killed men—why no threat of prison or scaffold was dreadful enough to stay the need of blotting out that significant smile or stilling that memory for ever.

She would not kill Norman. But to-night she knew that he might kill her: kill love, faith, happiness, self-respect, all the things for which alone women live.

Her head ached, her face felt hot and dry, and she pushed back the loosened masses of her hair with cold fingers.

"If I could only stop thinking! If I could cry——"

Presently her kneeling body sagged, a great weariness and coldness smote her. She must creep into bed. She glanced at the little cherry writing desk that she and Pidgy used in

common; a desk stuck with thick letters, littered with spotted blotters and newspaper clippings and dried ink bottles, and clotted pens.

Should she write Sidney? No, they were to have tea together on Tuesday. She must steel herself to tell him then.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE hours between were merely a blur. Hildegarde slept, if restlessly and briefly, she dressed, sipped coffee, drank water thirstily, went about her affairs. She answered questions, smiled automatically panting quietly all the time with a sort of interior breathlessness, jumping at every unexpected sound, nervous, like a creature pursued.

Tuesday, at the St. Francis, at five, something within her drummed incessantly. Tuesday, at the St. Francis, at five. Sidney would be waiting for her on Tuesday, at the St. Francis, at five.

It proved to be a dark, ominous day, with a leaden sky hanging low over the city's seven hills. A cold, steady wall of wind was moving down Mason Street, as down a tunnel, when Hildegarde slowly descended the hill, slowly threaded the steep streets above the hotel.

The afternoon of anticipation had seemed endless; she had restlessly begun to walk, blindly and rapidly, at four o'clock. A whole hour to waste, and the clocks seemingly standing still. Hildegarde went through the congested, odorous streets of Chinatown, looked at windows full of cheap talcum powder and safety razors, ivory and jade figures of Kwannon, the goddess of suffering womanhood, gay slippers and ox-blood jars, without seeing anything.

Olive-skinned, slanty-eyed babies stumbled ahead of her; a stout Italian woman, in the doorway of a market where strips of blue-white octopus tentacles and wriggling live shrimps were sold as food, argued loudly about a *capretta viva*.

Up the hills again, downward at last; it was quarter to five. Her whole body was in pain now; she felt weak and

chilly. If it were only over—if it were only over. . . .

The great ramp of the art school rose on her left as she descended the rough sidewalk. The wall was made in a fascinating pattern of blocks and angles; above it the eucalyptus trees bowed and tossed like great funereal plumes, beckoning on the storm. At the top of the steep the wet, warm wind was riotous, and with a last backward look she could see whitecaps racing on the bay, and the far line of hills on the Tiburon side upholding a low and heavy sky.

A picture-book day: bars of white sunlight through leaden clouds, white wave-tips upon a rough, leaden bay, and the dark sickles of the gray-green eucalyptus leaves turning their white under-sides to the wild airs.

She was blown into the hotel's big doorway, felt herself almost stupefied by the sudden warmth and peace and light within. A delicate trickle of music was coming from the tea room.

Sidney was waiting, smiling, splendid, a world of admiration in his eyes.

"Five minutes late, you vixen! Did you forget all about it?"

"Forget about it!" There was actual despair in her brief, mirthless laugh. The man glanced at her in sudden concern.

"What's the matter, Hilda?"

"Nothing. At least—but we'll talk about it. Only—as it happens, I was in no danger of forgetting!"

They went into the tea room, and found their favourite corner, an inconspicuous corner, where Hildegard's seat was a high-backed red velvet chair almost as formidable as a throne, and Sidney could sit with his back against the deeply upholstered wall, at an angle that brought their two faces close together.

So placed, they might have had the great hotel room entirely to themselves; Hildegard, seating herself to-day, thought with a sudden pang at her heart of all the other happy tea hours, when she had felt exquisitely safe, exquisitely secure, in this place and in this company.

"Orange pekoe and cinnamon toast as usual, I suppose?"

"As usual."

"But wait—didn't we say we'd have that wonderful-looking brown toast next time?"

"Did we?"

"Don't you remember, last Friday, when we were trying to escape the Martins and sneaked in back of the chairs?"

She did remember, she made herself face him, smiled faintly. The confidence, the gaiety of last Friday seemed already to belong to another life.

"Marmalade, Hilda? No, no marmalade," Sidney was saying to the waiter. "Nor pastries? No, we don't want any! It seems we're entitled to them," he added amusedly, to Hilda, as the waiter departed. And then suddenly, 'concernedly, "Hildegarde, you're not well?"

For her bright colour, stung into her cheeks by the walk and the wind, had faded, and she looked pale and ill.

"Not very," she conceded, trembling, close to tears.

"But what is it?" he asked, in alarm.

"Something—I have to talk to you about, Sid." She poured the topaz stream mechanically, poured cream, stirred her cup. "You must let me get this out as best I can," she said, with difficulty, not meeting his eye. "Years ago, I met a man—a boy he was then, Norman Montgomery. He was the nephew of some theatrical people my father knew—he was playing at the Alcazar. I saw him only a few times. He's back in town now—I'd not seen him in all these years, until he turned up at Moretti's on Sunday night. But I'd known his aunt and uncle were here—I thought he might be with them."

"And that's what was worrying you on Sunday, dear?"

"Yes." Hildegarde was silent. She felt as if she must die here, in the warm, music-filled air, before she could continue.

"That was the boy that kissed you?" Sidney asked, watching her anxiously, a little puzzled by the tenseness of her manner.

"Yes."

"But you told me that, dear, and I didn't mind! Do you mean?"—he could smile, he was amusedly removed from

vulgar jealousy—"do you mean that you rather like him still, darling?"

"Like him? I loathe him," she said, with a shudder.

"Well, then, what is this awful to-do all about?"

The hour had come. She was having tea with Sidney. She was telling Sidney. At this time to-morrow it would be over.

"Sidney, I didn't tell you all of it. I—I loved him, you know."

"You were fifteen, I think?"

"That's all."

"Well," he drawled, smiling significantly, "a lot you knew about love!"

"I knew nothing. Nothing." Hildegard drew away from him, rested her head against the high chair-back. Her blue eyes, under faintly drawn brows, were dark with pain. "Remember that, Sid," she said. "My mother wasn't the sort to tell me anything. I didn't know."

He was looking at her intently—curious, fascinated.

"Hilda, don't talk nonsense," he said, smiling uneasily.

She lowered her head a little, stared into his eyes. Her breath was coming unevenly, and the hand that lay on the table trembled.

"That's—just it. It's not—nonsense."

Silence. Silence. Sidney looked at his cup, scowled, pushed it impatiently away, and looked at her again.

"How do you mean?" he asked, displeased, after a space.

"That—that's what I want to tell you."

Another pause in which they looked, wide-eyed, at each other.

Then the slow understanding came. Sidney's face changed, his eyes darkened. She saw him bite his lip and put one hand over his eyes. There was a silence.

"My God—my God—my God, my poor little girl!" he whispered. And Hilda, sick at heart, saw his jaw tighten, and the blood darken his face.

He rested his elbow on the table, his eyes still covered, and she sat watching him.

"I see—I see——" he said confusedly.

"Sidney——" she began. But a quick jerk of his head interrupted her.

"Just a minute!" he muttered, and again Hildegarde was still.

"You mean you've had this on your mind, all this time, you poor little thing?" the man asked suddenly, looking up.

Tears came to Hildegarde's eyes, too, and her lip trembled. She nodded without speaking.

"Hildegarde," he began coaxingly, sensibly, on a sudden change of tone, "you don't know what you're saying. I don't believe it."

"You make it very hard for me," Hildegarde said briefly, simply, after a pause.

"My God, you poor little thing—you poor little thing!" Sidney said again, stupefied.

The girl blinked away her tears and managed to smile.

"We were at his aunt's and uncle's houseboat, in Tiburon," she began resolutely, but in a tone hardly audible. "I was—I told you, only fifteen. He was the first man who ever—made love—to me. I went crazy, I think. We were engaged—we talked about getting married."

"And then?"

"Then I only saw him twice or three times—we had lunch at Swain's bakery, once, and once we walked in the Park, and talked. That was all. After that he went away."

"You poor little thing!" Sidney said again, uncertainly. He looked puzzled, even annoyed. "I never dreamed it—you've kept it all this time!" he said.

"Afterward, I wrote him—three or four letters. Five, to be exact, but one was returned to me," Hildegarde said steadily. "And then——" The colour rushed suddenly, violently, into her face. "Then I was ill," she whispered, looking down.

"My God!" Sidney said, staring in blank amazement. His young handsome face was pale; he leaned back in his chair, his hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes never leaving her face.

"I'm so *sorry!*" Hildegarde said childishly, in a long silence.

"Sorry!" he echoed, giving her a somewhat forced smile. "I'm sorry only for *you*."

"Oh, don't!" she said faintly, fresh tears springing to her eyes.

"It's been worrying you!" he said, struck.

"Worrying me?" There was faint irony in the words as she repeated them. "It meant—losing—you," she faltered.

His old smile, or almost his old confident, proud smile.

"You don't believe that?"

"I was afraid."

"You mustn't be afraid. I'm sorry." He flung his handsome head back as if for air, scowled up at the gold arabesques of the high ceiling. "I'm sorry, of course," he said impatiently. "But nothing is ever going to make any difference between you and me. This is just—just our secret now, instead of yours. You've told me, and that's all there is about it. We'll never speak of it again. And I honour you for letting me know."

He laid his fine, warm strong hand, palm up, on the table, and Hildegarde put her own slender hand into it, and their fingers locked. But her face was still fearful.

"Sidney, there was a reason for my telling you now. He's here."

The man frowned suddenly, straightened.

"This man?"

Hildegarde nodded.

"I thought you said he had disappeared, that you didn't see him again?"

"I didn't. Not until a few days ago."

"Oh. Oh, I'd forgotten that." Sidney's face changed. His manner hardened by an almost imperceptible shade. "That's why you told me," he said, with a hint of suspicion, of accusation, in his voice.

"Partly."

They were miles apart. Life was cold and dead between them.

"He deserted you," Sidney summarized it presently, in a voice he made steady and commonplace. "He deserted you, and you were ill. What did your father and mother do?"

"I ran away. I was afraid of my father. I got a job."

"And then——"

"Then," she took it up, suffocating, "I went to the hospital. I was dangerously sick—too soon. And I was all run down, scarlet fever followed. I was weeks in bed."

"Hilda," Sidney burst out despairingly, again resting his elbow on the table and pressing his fingers over his face. "If I could kill him!"

The girl sat back, linked fingers in her lap, eyes dark and sombre under the hat brim. Through all the tightened pain and bewilderment of her soul one phrase rang triumphantly: "I've told him. I've told him!"

"We must think of this," Sidney said after a pause. He passed his hand over his face, as if feverish, frowned, assumed a sudden patience and reasonableness. "He has letters, hasn't he?"

"He may have—yes, I know he has."

"You don't think he would have destroyed them?"

"No. He said that finding them in his trunk reminded him of me."

"I see. We'll—we'll have to think of that, Hilda," Sidney warned her, with a desperate visible effort to speak calmly. "He might get ugly. He might make trouble for you afterward."

"I don't think he would. I don't think he's that type."

The man was scowling, deep in thought.

"We'll have to settle him, and then forget him!" he said. "We can't risk it. After we were married, you know, if he started anything—it would kill my mother."

"I'll have to tell her," he decided suddenly. "That's the best thing to do. She's wonderful—Mother. You know how fine she is? If I tell her, now, right in the beginning, she'll tell us what to do. She won't tell my father, I know that."

Hildegard felt her soul wince and shrivel. Somehow,

this was harder to face than if he had said that they must part. Of her hold over him she had some reason to feel sure. But to submit the painful, sordid, shameful story to his mother's clear, bright untouched honour was a frightening plan.

Her colour ebbed, she bit her lower lip, drew a sharp breath.

"That'll mean she's on our side," Sidney went on, not seeing her, busy with his own thoughts. "She'll get someone—old Dixie, the family lawyer, maybe, to handle this man—Montgomery. That's our best bet, Hildegard." He paused, staring at the tablecloth, his boyish face distressed and perplexed. "It's too bad. It's too bad, dear," he said gently. "But now you just mustn't worry your dear little head about it any more. We'll fix it, you'll see. It's a—pity, isn't it? But we'll have to make the best of it."

"You're very generous, Sidney." But somehow, Hildegard felt crushed, cold, felt that he was slipping farther and farther away from her with every word. She reached for her gloves, glanced down the long room to the clock. There was nothing more to say; it was not for her to make terms.

A young man, smiling a greeting, was coming toward their table. As she and Sidney rose to their feet, he joined them. A stoutish, rather common-looking person. Norman.

Sidney, who had not seen his approach, straightened as if shot. Hildegard saw the blood dark in his face, the sudden busyness with check and pencil and tip that served him as an excuse to evade any touching of Norman's hand when they were introduced.

"How do, Hilda?" Norman said amiably. "Just drifting about and happened to glance in here and recognized your hat!"

"I'll have to run," Sidney said, with difficulty, addressing himself pointedly to Hildegard. His face was livid; he spoke as if half strangled. "I'll see you soon."

"Don't let me drive you away," Norman begged politely, as they all walked toward the door. "I used to know quite a friend of yours," he added conversationally to Sidney, "Bob Winters. Fine chap."

"I'll telephone you," Sidney said hurriedly, to Hildegard alone. "To-morrow—or soon, anyway."

"I know—all right!" she agreed nervously and quickly. He had turned toward the checking room, he was gone. She and Norman went on, into the lobby. Hildegard caught a last glimpse of Sidney, in the belted overcoat now, rapidly walking down one of the long corridors.

"He's a good-looking fellow all right," Norman conceded then. "I hear you see quite a good deal of him. Anything definite?"

"Not at all."

"How about supper? It's after six."

"I don't have dinner when I've had tea. I'll go straight to the theatre, I think."

"I'll walk with you!"

She went silently at his side; she could make no further effort, protest no longer. She was spent.

The street lights were dazzling; the shops gushed hospitable brilliance. Powell Street cable cars, starting up the sharp high hill that ended with the ropes and festoons of lights that outlined the Fairmont, were jammed with dangling forms. Boys were crying newspapers.

Work. Work. Work. That must be her salvation until she heard from Sidney again. He would tell his mother, and they would decide on some plan. He would not give Hildegard up. They loved each other.

The heavy black form at her side was only a dream; he didn't matter. Let him maunder along about himself if he would; she needn't listen. They were at the theatre, and hastily and indifferently she yielded her gloved hand to his for an instant's pressure.

She mustn't think now. She must work.

CHAPTER XXIV

THIS was Tuesday; on Friday morning Sidney's letter was put into her hand. Her sight blurred, and her whole body trembled as she took it; the three days had been a time of agony, she had spent herself in endless imagined arguments with him, pleading with him, satisfying him, winning him all over again. Whatever was coming now, she told herself at least this tremor of nervous suspense would be over.

But in his note Sidney only asked her to see him; would Saturday morning be a good time? Would she come to his aunt's apartment in the Piccadilly; Aunt Harriet and the family were away, and they could talk comfortably there.

She answered in three words; three words written in the middle of a sheet of the plain, fine white paper she liked, in her own quaint, oddly cramped, oddly distinguished handwriting:

"I'll come, Sidney."

And when the hour came, she very quietly pinned on her small hat with its upturned brim, and buttoned on her homespun coat. No violets to-day; it was many months since she had been without violets on Saturday morning.

In the beautiful foyer of the Piccadilly, she asked for Mrs. Craigie's apartment. Immediately a plain, middle-aged woman who had been sitting on one of the small stone benches in the wide, colonnaded and palm-decorated court, arose and came toward her. Hildegard recognized a sort of upper servant from "Broadhall," a fine, motherly woman to whom she had spoken more than once in Mrs. Penfield's room there, or in one of the halls.

"Miss Sessions," said Augusta pleasantly; "Mrs. Pen-

field couldn't come in this morning, and she asked me to show you your way."

It was civilly, quite simply said; the woman might know no more than she betrayed. But Hildegarde's heart chilled at the sight of her. This was the Family's arrangement. The Family had entered into the affair.

They went upstairs, and Augusta left her at the door of a beautiful and spacious drawing room whose windows gave a wide view of the bay, the blue serene bay with the winter sunshine warm upon it to-day, and the Gate, that led out to the ocean. Hildegarde had time only for a confused impression of winter roses and snowy curtains and crackling wood fire before Sidney came in from the next room and stood looking at her.

And instantly, with a sort of desperate laughter that was close to tears, they were in each others' arms, and her little hat had slipped back, and her whole slender body was strained in the grip of his big hands, under the passionate hurry of his kisses.

"Hildegarde! It's seemed a hundred years without you!"

He made her sit down on the big couch before the fire, sat down himself with his arm about her and his body twisted so that they faced each other.

"Nothing matters but this—nothing matters but this," he said, over and over. And defiantly and boyishly he added, "They shan't keep us apart! They shan't do it."

"Oh, Sid," the girl stammered, lips trembling, eyes brimmed with tears even though she smiled, "I've been so worried!"

"I knew you had. I'd have seen you sooner—but you heard about Jay?"

"Your brother?"

"Yes, he was hurt playing polo, Wednesday. They don't know how badly—they think not very badly. And that's—that's what kept me!" He had gathered both her hands; they were clinging together eagerly, their faces almost touching. "Don't cry, Hildegarde," Sidney said now, tenderly. "It's all good news!"

"It can't be!" she whispered, shaken, tearful, flushing suddenly with April colour.

"But it is," he said. "This," he repeated, kissing her forehead, from which the heavy, rich golden hair was swept back in wings, "this is all that matters, Hildegarde! God, but I have been hungry for you!"

"But tell me," she directed him breathlessly, still afraid.

"Well, this is it. I had a long talk with Mother, and then my father talked to me——"

"I know."

"And this is it. Of course," Sidney said, flushing, scowling, and looking into the fire, "my mother felt *terribly*. You can imagine that? But she was wonderful. She said—almost right away, that the—well, that the past was the past, and that now we must think of what can be done in the future."

"Oh, Sidney, she is very generous!" Hildegarde said, her face wet with tears.

"She was wonderful. You haven't any idea how wonderful she was. She kept saying 'Poor little Hildegarde, poor little girl!' She understands, you know. Mother understands everything.

"Well, this is her idea," the man went on, as Hildegarde, her anxious eyes expectantly fixed upon him, was silent. "She says that we—must wait."

He looked at the girl seriously, as if uncertain of her attitude. But Hildegarde's face brightened with incredulous joy.

"Wait? Only that!" Again she faltered into tears, again fought them, and smiled. "I'm a cry-baby this morning," she said. "But—but I expected that they would—separate us!"

"Mother says we must wait at least two years," Sidney said, and stopped short.

"Two years!" She had turned a little pale, her lips parted as if she would protest, but she bit them shut again, nodded gravely. "If she says so——" she said, faintly.

"Well, she does, and for this reason, Hildegarde. She

wants my father to see that I am in earnest. She wants all this thing to clear up. She wants me to graduate, and maybe have a post-graduate year, as Jay did, at Harvard."

"I see."

"Here's Mother's argument," Sidney, encouraged, proceeded more eagerly. "She wants us not to see each other, and not to write. As soon as that's gone on for several months, we'll have somebody get at Montgomery, get any letters of yours that he has back. Shut him up once and for all, without giving him a chance to see why we're doing it. No notoriety, no fuss or talk. And then it's time enough to announce our engagement—it won't be so long, Hildegard! I'll be working, you'll be working——"

"But two years?" she said, staring into space.

"Well, Mother says it may not be that! But she says we had better count on that. Count on my finishing here, going abroad with her, coming back to Harvard in the fall, getting my B. A.—you see that takes us to a year from June, and it's only January now!"

"Oh, Sidney," she protested, clinging to his hand, leaning against his shoulder, "it seems so long!"

His confident mood—she knew that it was reflected from his mother's own bright definiteness—faded somewhat. His face clouded.

"I know," he said gloomily.

"Perhaps it's the best thing," Hildegard said, "perhaps it's the wisest way. But—but it seems so hard, when we—we love each other—to be separated for months and months!"

"I know," he agreed again darkly. "And I told my mother so at first," he added, with warming resentment; "but she—she said—at first I wouldn't listen to her, but then she reminded me that it hadn't been announced, and that lots of people had to wait to be married——"

"Well, and that's true, Sid, of course," Hildegard conceded slowly, in the pause.

"She says she knows that we love each other, but that we're both young, and that this—this thing has to be all settled before we tell people," Sidney offered.

The girl was thoughtful, staring ahead of her, frowning.

"Of course, it's a fearful thing to threaten her—her feeling about the family," she said slowly.

"Well, you know how she is! It's Jays and Reids and Porters and Craigies all over the place. I think it would kill her," Sidney added frankly, "if anything ever was said about—well—any of us."

"Yet she *will* agree to our marriage, Sid?"

"Agree to it? Why, this is all her scheme."

Hildegard nodded, sick at heart. She saw the real scheme far clearer than he, this impressionable boy to whom what his mother, his family, thought, was the one right thing in the world. He would not dread the separation from the woman he loved now simply because he would not anticipate it. And afterward, he would be bound by his word.

"Ah, they're wonderful people, they're very clever!" Hildegard thought, as she had first thought on her first visit to "Broadhall" a few months ago. "They're clever!"

They would hold him now with their sympathy, their eagerness to help him out of a difficult situation. And they would trust the months to bring him back to them, to blot out the memory of the girl—what was she?—a chorus girl, or something like that, about whom he had been so mad for a little while. He should have all the consideration, all the explanation he wanted, he should have Europe and the wonderful Eastern university, new friends, new scenes, a new sense of his value to the Family, his responsibility to his line.

And he would forget her! She looked at the handsome face, aristocratic and definite, the keen eyes, the well-groomed skin and hair, the expensively made suit and tie and shoes and monogrammed handkerchief that set them off so well.

"Before I talked to my mother," Sidney was saying, "I had been thinking what I'd do if she asked me to give you up, Hilda, break off our understanding completely. And that's what I expected her—or rather, my father—to do."

"And what were you going to do, Sid?" Her voice was tired. There was a wistful sort of motherliness in her smile; a smile he had never had from her before.

"Why, I was going to tell her that that was absolute nonsense, and that I'd get out, of course!"

"And would you have, Sid?"

His arm drew her nearer, he smiled into her eyes.

"Would I? Why, Hilda dear, like a shot. And you and I would be house-hunting in the Mission this minute."

The picture made her heart leap up with wild hope.

"Oh, Sidney, Sidney, if we only could! Leave them all out of it, live our own lives!"

Her enthusiasm touched him; suddenly he was on fire.

"Hildegard, will you?"

"This afternoon!" she said, between a laugh and a sob.

"This afternoon!" he exulted. "*That's* the answer! We'll get married first and let them discuss it afterward. Oh, you darling—do you mean that to-night—this very night, you will be my wife?"

"Never to be separated again!" she whispered, in tears, her wet face against his, his arm about her.

"Hilda, dearest, they never could have ~~done~~ it for long!"

Her cheek touched his, her eyelashes were sopped with tears, but she was smiling.

"Sidney—you've forgiven it all—the stupidity of it?"

"Forgiven it!" he echoed. "Why, sweetheart, sweetheart, you don't think I'm any better than you?"

"Then that's all I care about!" she whispered, on a child's deep exhausted sigh. And for a while she lay in his arms, her tumble of shining hair loosened against his shoulder, her fingers locked in his, her eyes on the fire. "I was stupid, I was ignorant, I wasn't bad, Sid," she said, after a space, in a dreamy shadow of her own voice.

"Forget it, Hilda! Forget it all. We'll be married this afternoon, and then we'll go house-hunting. I've got—well, I've got a hundred a month, anyway, from my aunt's estate——"

Suddenly he whistled, as if struck by a doubt, and she glanced up over her own shoulder to the face that was so close, with a question in her dewy blue eyes. Sidney, meeting her look, laughed reassuringly.

"They'll come through," he said comfortably. "They'll not let us starve!"

"They'll forgive us," Hildegard said hopefully.

Rent, grocery, clothes, telephone, carfares, amusements. Well, other people did it on twelve hundred a year—she and Sidney could do it. But he must have spent at least that for clothes alone, for the last six years.

There would be newspaper uproar, of course, gossip. The proud Penfield name would be dragged into print.

But she and Sidney wouldn't mind that. They would be in a tiny apartment somewhere—smaller than Pidgy's, for Pidgy paid a forty-dollar rent—it would smell of cabbages and Monday soap. . . .

Some reporter might even unearth the real cause of the delay, the fact that there was a man who had some old letters of Mrs. Sidney Penfield. Newspapers made the most of a story like that.

She sat erect, suddenly, spoke with assurance.

"We're crazy to think of it, Sid. Of course we'll wait. They have been wonderful to us—we'll have to play fair! Suppose your father is right and Norman should threaten us? Such things are always happening—and where would we be then?"

"No, we'll have to wait. That's the only sensible thing to do. What are two years? Even if it's going to be as long as that, and it may not!"

"Listen, Hildegard, we're going to get married this afternoon. They can forgive us whenever they get good and ready."

Her senses swam for a moment. Married—this afternoon! But she shook her head.

"No, dear, we mustn't lose our heads. They would have a right to be terribly angry at us then. It isn't as if they had broken the engagement—that would be different."

He slid to his knees beside her, put his arms about her.

"Hildegard, dearest, what on earth can they do?"

"Oh, everything!" she said ruefully. "It might mean

that you gave up everything for me—that you lived in a horrid smelly place—and worried and worried about money.”

“What would we care!” he said eagerly.

“Dearest, you wouldn’t—at first. And it would be Paradise, for me, I’ve always been poor. But gradually——”

She leaned her forehead against his, sighed heavily.

“Gradually, Sid, you’d begin to fret because you couldn’t take good care of me. And gradually I’d see the horrible wrong I’d done you—separating you from them all, when they love you so. And that would make both of us unhappy.”

“But, Hilda, Hilda, don’t you see that they’d forgive us, that they’d make it easy for us, almost right away?”

“Not necessarily, Sid, not if there had been a break and a scandal. They might feel—they’d have a perfect right to feel, that they had tried to be generous, and that we had failed them! This way only means a wait.”

“Mother said it mightn’t be anything like two years!” Sidney said reluctantly, painfully, after a silence, scowling into space.

“No, of course it might not!”

“If I did awfully well at college, you know.”

“Your father might soften, you mean?”

“Sure he might.”

“And then,” Hildegard said, with a great ache in her yearning voice, “then how wonderfully happy it would be!”

“Well, that’s right, too, Hilda. You know, if they’d been meaner,” Sidney said frankly, “if they’d talked of busting it up, I would have walked right out! But they were so damn’ decent!”

She rested against him quietly. She wondered if their smartness hadn’t included even that; perfectly anticipating the effect upon the boy of harshness or of “decentness.” But it didn’t matter; the thing had to be faced, and only upon Sidney’s faithfulness did the outcome depend. If they were right, and he was going to be led into forgetting——

“No, they’ve got us in a trap, and we can’t get out,” she

said. "We've got to bear it somehow—I see that, Sid. Your mother is right—we'll have to wait. It may not be so long—it may not be two whole years——"

"Oh, it won't, Hildegarde!" he said fervently. And she could see that he was catching desperately at this as their one real hope; the dream of marriage at once, to-day, had been no more than a dream. "That's what Mother says!" he went on eagerly. "That I'll have to graduate, and we'll have to handle this—this crook, somehow, first. It seems terrible, I know——"

"It seems terrible," she said, as he paused, "that you and I have to wait for anything. But I know—I know that this is the right way!"

And she dashed the tears from her eyes and smiled at him.

"So now," she said courageously, "we've got to begin—to-day. No more tea parties and no more Sundays at 'Broadhall.'"

The thought frightened her. She patted his hand, blinked, and smiled again.

"And I'll go over to Brown and dig into the newspaper work," she said, after a moment. "It'll keep me far busier than I am now, and that'll be a good thing. And you'll work, too, and graduate, and have your European trip——"

"You know my mother had always intended having that four months' holiday in Europe with me when I graduated," Sidney said. "She was willing to give it up, when it looked as if you and I would be married."

"I know she was!" Hildegarde conceded gratefully.

"You can imagine how much fun I'll get out of it!" he said dolefully.

"And you can imagine how much fun I'll get out of doing society reporting," Hildegarde countered.

"But it'll make it all the more wonderful when we get together, Hildegarde!"

"It'll make that—heaven."

She stood up, looked at herself in the mirror over the mantel, and laughed ruefully.

"I'm a beautiful sight, with my nose all swollen and my

eyes parboiled!" she said, in a voice that cleared and strengthened as she spoke.

"You're the most beautiful woman in the world, everyone knows that," Sidney answered simply, getting up to stand beside her, at the hearth. He put one arm about her.

"I feel"—Hildegarde said suddenly, looking down at the coat button she was twisting, looking up suddenly for a quick meeting of eyes, and dropping her thick lashes again—"I feel that I alone am to blame for this, Sidney, and it's right that I should pay. Don't think—in the months to come—that I don't see that. Your mother and father have been wonderful to me—I know they think they are doing the generous and the right thing now."

"My father, as far as that goes, isn't talked over to our marriage at all yet," Sidney admitted. "But my mother says that, if I work like the deuce at college, and show him how much in earnest I am, and all that, she'll bring him round without any trouble. You see, Hilda, as bad luck would have it, he's had a blackmail case hanging over him for years—a Frenchwoman who was my mother's maid, in Paris, ten years ago. She has nothing on him—not a letter, not a witness, but just the same she can always get people interested in her story, always get a lawyer to handle the case—for a while, anyway, and it frets the life out of the old man. My mother tells me that the first thing he feared, when she told him that this—this fellow Montgomery had something on you, was that he would hound us for the rest of our lives. As it is, my father's lawyers have all sorts of ways of getting at such people—he'll never know what they're after. But it takes time!"

"I know. And your mother thinks that we'd better not even write to each other, Sid?"

"Yes, and for this reason: she says that would lead to such an interest in each other's plans—she said something like that; I may not be getting it straight——"

"Well, I can understand that, too," Hildegarde said reluctantly. "But oh, Sid—Sid!" she breathed, close against him, her fragrant, shining head just below the line of his

chin, as he bent down to hold her, "how long it will be before we may do this again!"

"That's the part that seems like a bad dream, Hilda! I know I don't get it at all yet," the man answered simply.

She held him at arm's length, devoured the bigness, the cleanness and fineness of him with eyes that seemed never to have their fill. Her own eyes were swollen with tears, her face blotched with them, but the splendidly disciplined line of her mouth was firm, and she managed a smile between the lashes that were stuck together in dark points, like those of a weeping child.

"Kiss me good-bye, Sid. I'm going now. God bless you, dear. I don't want you to come downstairs with me—our two years of waiting begins this minute. You'll not forget me, I know—and I'll wait for you. God bless you, dear."

"Hilda," he said, catching her tight in the big arms whose hold seemed to rest her wearied body and soul so infinitely, seemed to lift her above all the agony of spirit and mind that was exhausting her, "you'll wait, won't you, darling? It won't be two years. We'll laugh at this some day—see if we don't!"

His own tears were running down his face now, and their wet cheeks were together.

"Of course we will. Why, thousands of people have to wait that long, Sid. It won't seem anything, once it's over. And you'll tell your mother," Hilda stumbled on, crying bitterly, "that I sent her my love—and that I'm s-s-sorry! And now," she went on, with a desperate spurt of courage, "I'm going. Remember, that I love you much, much more than myself, Sid, that these times we've had together have been the happiest I've ever had—or ever will have."

"No, no," he protested, holding her chin in his big fingers, one arm braced tight about her shoulders. "Our happiest times are ahead, Hildegard. Swear that you'll wait for me!"

"And you swear it to me!" she faltered, smiling through tears.

"Ah, darling, as if I hadn't—a thousand times!"

"But swear it again."

"I swear it. And, Hildegard, if it gets hard for me, and if I feel as if I couldn't *live* without seeing you—hearing your voice—I'm going to remember this morning, and I'm going to say, 'This is our test. This is what's going to make all the happy years together all the happier. This isn't going to be for ever—just a matter of months, and I've given my word, and she's given hers, that we'll be faithful!'"

"Why, Sidney," the girl said thickly, wiping her eyes, and in a strengthened voice, "seen that way, it's *nothing*. Just two little years—perhaps less! And I'll tell myself," she promised him in turn, "when I get sick of work, and loneliness, and thinking of all I have missed, I'll tell myself that you're waiting—thinking about the silly, weak, stupid girl who—who loves you with all her heart and s-s-soul——"

She was sobbing on his shoulder. After a minute he dried her eyes with his soft, big handkerchief, and then his own, and looking into each other's eyes, they kissed solemnly, lingeringly, her fast-beating heart against his heart and her storm-shaken body like an exhausted bird in his arms.

"It frightens me so to leave you, Sid. To feel that no matter how terribly I need to see you—this afternoon, to-morrow, any time—that I can't!"

"Hildegard," he whispered, kissing her deeply, passionately, his face against her own, "I can't let you go!"

"You must!" she said, instinctively afraid of what this note might introduce into the talk that had not been lover-like, until now. And with one more embrace of slender arms about his neck, one quick, childish kiss against the clean-shaven cheek whose touch her own cheek knew so well, she was gone.

In the outer room the woman servant was at a telephone; she was speaking, innocently enough, to some furniture man or upholsterer.

"Mrs. Craigie gets back on Monday, so that it must be here on Saturday, please—the cushions could be sent Monday morning, that would be all right——"

Hildegarde, discoloured of face, with swollen eyes, faced her courageously, for a simple good-bye, went on into the bright winter sunshine of the streets. She felt beaten, dazed, nervously alert and untired.

Family. Family. Family. This talk in his aunt's beautiful apartment, with photographs of the family bulwarking him. The family servant discreetly there, discreetly a witness and a support for the scene. Mother, father, brother quoted. The family lawyer to act.

Augusta would give the son of the house a few minutes to sit brooding bitterly before the fire. Then she would insert a non-committal head into the room.

"It's one o'clock, Mr. Sidney. Would you like me to order you a chop and a salad from downstairs, sir?"

"No, I'm going to take a walk," Sidney would perhaps say. "Do you know where my mother is?"

"She was to be at the hospital, sir, in case the doctors thought there might have to be an operation for Mr. Jay. The specialist was to get here at about two, sir."

"Well, I'll walk that way." And there would the Family be, surrounding him, bulwarking him again. His mother, his aunts, Jay's young wife, at the hospital, needing him, consulting him, making much of him.

"Sid, dear, you're to have a bite at Uncle George's, and then drive the baby and her nurse home, if you will. Jay wanted to have her in for a while this afternoon, just to play around the room. And, Sid, come in early to-morrow, because your father wants to hear that symphony music in the afternoon, and you're to drive him in so that he will have a nice long time with Jay first. And will you telephone Ethel—Harriet—Marie Louise——"

That was Sid's side. And her side was dirty Turk Street, with the chill, bright, sunny wind blowing chaff and papers along it in a wild dance; her side was the Warner apartment, stuffy, dirty, dusty, crowded, with Pidgy rubbing the tonic into her hair and stitching together the runs in her stocking heels with the stockings already on her feet.

No one to talk with about it. No one in whom she could

confide, who would not be bored with her 'confidences, and more amused than interested in her wretchedness.

Two years of it. But perhaps it would not be so long! Two years of it.

Well, she must begin somewhere. This was Saturday—one o'clock. She must be at the theatre before two. One: twelve. One: twelve, if that clock was right, outside the jeweller's shop. One: twelve. Any place, it didn't matter—but her head was so tired, her whole body and spirit felt so bruised and weary that she must eat something or she could not get through the hot, crowded hour of the chorus's dressing.

Dove's Quaker Bakery. That would do as well as any other place. Dairy dishes a specialty, and it all looked bright and clean. Toast, please, and tea—orange pekoe. They didn't have it? Then any green tea, please. And toast, please.

Two years of it. Well, that was her punishment. It was all her own fault; it was all the bitter fruit of that hour of weakness, of ignorance, of madness, under a summer moon so many years ago.

It had cost her her profession; she was to have been a teacher. It had cost her her parents, poor as those parents might have been, her brothers, her home. Those weeks of pain and weakness in the hospital, too. All that. All that. And now, after years of work, she had struggled to a place of her own in the sun. And that must go, too.

Sidney. So kind, so big, so gay. So much at home in the world for which she hungered; the world of books, music, refinement, beauty. And he loved her, and she him. But the shadow had come between them as it had been between her and everything else. Two years of shadow.

And after them, would there really be sunshine again?

CHAPTER XXV

THE weariness, the discouragement, and the bitterness of the months that followed presently crystallized for Hildegarde into a strange form. That form was a burning and absorbing jealousy of Sidney's sister-in-law, the established and assured girl who had been Peggy Paget of Boston, and who was now, in her twenty-fifth year, the wife of Arthur Jay Penfield, potentially a social leader in the state's most exclusive set, the mother of the Penfield grandchild, and the darling of that whole sacred unit known as the Family.

Why her envy should select Peggy, rather than any one of the other girls of the group, rather than Sidney himself, Hildegarde did not know. Sarah, Harriet, Marie Louise were all Peggy's intimates and equals, each and every one of them, Hildegarde herself considered nicer, kinder, more human than the impeccable Peggy.

But, before she knew it, and in some possessive and painful fashion quite incomprehensible to her, she became miserably conscious only of that one young woman; Peggy became her incarnate resentment, and Peggy's life the one life in the world at once unendurably enviable and maddeningly omnipresent in her thoughts.

She saw her name in the papers, for although Peggy presently would reach an age when her doings would be kept, like all those of the Penfield clan, sacred from the vulgar eye of the press, she was not there yet. Great lenience was felt where the amusements of the younger members of the Family were concerned; if their débuts and engagements and theatricals were considered interesting breakfast-table reading by the masses, by all means let the great Penfields unbend so far. It kept the press friendly and did no harm. Mrs. Jay Pen-

field, who was playing the lead in Burlingame Club theatricals. Mrs. Jay Penfield, whose sister, Miss Nancy Estes Paget, was visiting her from Boston. Mrs. Jay Penfield, whose remarkable golf on Saturday last had placed her in the front ranks of society's players.

And when she could not see that name that seemed to leap at her from all sides, Hildegard tortured herself with imagining the details of that more fortunate woman's lot.

It would be so wonderful to belong to them. To have the liberty of the big beautiful houses, to know one's self able to dress always for the happy part of favourite, to know one's self fitted for it, able, by right of education and birth and accomplishments, to hold the highest position civilization and society might offer, be it what it would.

Peggy had all that. What had she done to deserve it? To deserve the protected, adored babyhood—"one of those adorable Paget children"? To deserve the careful training, the French and Italian and music, the selected concerts, the specially arranged lectures, the care of health and teeth, the marvellous vacations on Buzzards Bay, the cautiously approved friendships, the loving, proud, exacting background of the Family?

Europe, and the right friends, the right experiences there. Home again, with just the correct frocks and hats and fans and slippers for her first season. Cousins crowding about her at youthful dances, saving Peggy any concern about her popularity, reminding her of the big game next week, making engagements for the Christmas holidays.

And then Jay, handsome, devoted, a Westerner, true, but of the well-known Penfield family. More frocks, more presents, more glory for Peggy, ending in that beautiful day of ivory satin and shrouding creamy lace, of flower perfumes and the strains of exquisite organ music, of laughter and tears, her wedding day, that, ending one perfect dream, had only commenced another.

And now she was Mrs. Jay Penfield, and all the beautiful and dignified life of the group circled about her. Nearest to Jay, the oldest son. Nearest to the precious grand-

daughter. And so charmingly near to all the others, too, consulted, admired, found amusing and indispensable on all sides.

Thinking these things, Hildegarde would find herself seized with a sort of madness of resentment. Why *should* one girl have all this and another girl so much less than nothing? Another girl dirt, and squalor, and shiftlessness and drink for her inheritance, and shame for her companion in the days that should have been happiest, proudest of all in her life?

In vain she tried to shake off the constant, agonizing comparison. She did not want to think about Peggy; what was it to her what Peggy had or did or was? With an almost physical struggle, with a shutting of her eyes and a shaking of her head, Hildegarde would try to dismiss it, try to banish it once and for all.

But it crept back. When, weary and cold, she went into some spotted and odorous little restaurant for a bowl of soup and an apple dumpling, it was there. What was Peggy eating now? Before what inviting board was she shaking out her stiff big napkin? Who was opposite her, ready to admire the lovely little Mrs. Penfield, in her dashing hat and big fur coat?

When Hildegarde lay wakeful and straight on her side of the lifeless, flat bed she shared with Pidgy, staring at the angles and bars and strange looming shapes of light and shade that checkered the fussy, unlovely room, she thought of Peggy. Peggy, lying in thin silk among great satin comforters and snowy embroidered pillows, in a wide room whose windows looked down upon formal gardens, sweet with roses, and upon the rounded tops of the great oaks that enclosed "Broadhall."

Sidney would graduate in June. Sidney would graduate in June. And she knew that he could not go away, away to the East, and to Europe, and to all the new experiences, without one word—one line, to her.

For he must be missing her, and as she was missing him. He must be experiencing, when he passed the tea rooms,

the foyers and lounges of the big hotels, the same plunging agony of his heart that Hildegard felt when these old settings for their first wild happiness brought back its memory. He could not catch the fragrance of Russian violets without remembering her!

Through the hot languid spring days, and into May's premature summer, she went steadily about her work, waiting—waiting. She grew thinner, and her face was all the more beautiful because of the new hint of high cheek-bones, the new mysterious deepness of eye-sockets, the new transparent clearness of skin. And the blue eyes, in their thick fringe of up-curling lashes, burned always with a wistful, a hungry light.

All her world was distasteful to her now, but she was gentle, patient with it. She was waiting. The smells, the pretensions, the cheapness and vulgarity smote upon senses made keen by pain and straining toward beauty, beauty that she had found and lost again.

Hildegard ate her *minestrone* in the heavy atmosphere of Moretti's; she slept in the cluttered, stuffy environment of Pidgy's room. But she belonged to these things no longer. She could look beyond the heated restaurant, the veils of drifting blue smoke, the soap-scrolled mirrors and jangling piano, the sweating waiters and the tousled newspaper men crumbling sour, crusty bread, and see her own life, serene, protected, beautiful, and lessoned by these months of purification, and she was content.

For had she not his promise, and he hers? And what were the two brief years that lay between that promise and its fulfilment?

Engaged. Engaged. That's what she was. Engaged to one of the finest men in the whole world. Just waiting—as so many engaged persons must wait!

"Patience!" she said to herself, folding and shaking the bunched thick costumes that exuded clouds of powder, stitching bits of loosened gold braid, fluffing cloth flowers with slim finger-tips, "Patience! This won't seem long—once it's over."

Norman Montgomery had gone to Washington and Oregon with a stock company, sending his trunk to Pidgy for storage meanwhile. One May day, Hildegarde quite simply picked up the trunk key from a paper candy box on Pidgy's bureau, and unlocked the trunk, that bulked so large in the back hallway, where the wash basket and the carpet sweeper and the broom were kept.

She was alone in the apartment; she opened the trunk at her leisure, and explored it thoroughly. And behind a limp blue-and-green cloth pocket in the lid she found them: four flat letters in the childish hand that had been hers six years ago.

There were other letters there, but Hildegarde paid no attention to them. She tossed her own aside, and repacked the trunk neatly, there was to be nothing underhanded about this affair. If Norman ever dared allude to the disappearance of these documents, she meant to answer him quite truthfully.

Six years after she had written them, those childish letters that moved from the rapturous eagerness of first love to first doubt, and from doubt to the agony of awakening and betrayed womanhood, Hildegarde slowly read them, read them with a nauseated spirit and with reluctant eyes, as if she were taking a dose of incredibly bitter medicine. Four of them—there had been but five, and one had come back undelivered.

She took them to the kitchen, lighted a gas-burner, and made a little pyre of them. The smoky flames swept up; Hildegarde beat the letters down with a long-handled fork, twisting and hammering them until they were only black soot clinging to the circular iron ring.

They were gone. Through the opened window warm May airs were pouring across the kitchen; the world smelled of tar, and wet streets, and clean paint. There were apricots and raspberries on the table; things that had nothing to do with winter. By the time the seasons had run their course again, and apricots and raspberries had come back, where would she be, Hildegarde wondered?

A little grime of black ashes, clinging to the gas stove.

There lay the precious letters that had worried Sidney so, that had been as a weapon in the big, stupid, clumsy hands of Norman Montgomery.

Knowing them destroyed, she could breathe freer. But the thought of writing Sidney she dismissed almost as soon as it came.

In the first place, it would be breaking her word. She had agreed to his mother's terms, she would abide by them.

Secondly, writing such a thing was dangerous. Such a letter, lost or fallen into the wrong hands, might be as dangerous as had been the destroyed letters themselves.

And thirdly, it was May now, full tide of delicious early summer. He would graduate in a few weeks, and surely at that happy, excited time, he would persuade his mother that he must see Hildegarde, if only once, if only for one of those exquisite tea hours they loved so well?

And what a tea hour that would be! How beautiful she would make herself, how loving, how trusting! It might even be that then, over their orange pekoe, the wonderful moment might come when Sidney would say: "But we don't have to wait any longer! Mother says not, and my father agrees! And now—if that last evidence is gone——"

Hildegarde lived for that hour; thought of no other. Sidney—Sidney—Sidney—her thoughts drummed and sang and reiterated day after day. Her splendid, clean, smiling big man, in his belted coat, with a fragrant bunch of foil-wrapped violets in his gloved hands for the woman he loved!

May. She grew a little less confident, as the April stillness gave place to high, cold gritty winds, as morning after morning came in with walls of dripping, silent, enfolding fog.

Graduation over. June gone. And the streets were scarred from tiny explosions of firecrackers, and hung with limp bunting that was fog-soaked and streaked with gray-blue, pink-red, muddy white.

The Penfields had gone to Europe. Miss Helen, Mrs. A. J., Mrs. Jay, Jr., with her sister Miss Paget and Mr. Sidney, would spend the summer months in England, possibly returning via the Orient early in the fall.

He had kept his word to his mother and father, that was all, Hildegarde told herself. But she said it with a frightened sense of utter blankness, a hammering of fear in her heart. This was early July. She had seen him last in January.

Until now, only their promise had parted them. But there were to be physical distances between them, too—continents, oceans, the biggest things in the world.

He would put on his evening clothes, laugh and talk at the dinner table on the big ship. He would dance with Helen—with Peggy——

Strangers would ask who he was, the athletic tall man with the flash of white teeth in a sunburned face. That's Sidney Penfield of San Francisco, old A. J. Penfield's son. The girl with the white coat is his brother's wife, and the smaller girl, her sister, Miss Paget of Boston.

Well, she must bear it, somehow. Undoubtedly, women had been enduring this sort of thing since time began. July, August—it would only be another year now. She must trust him as she knew he trusted her.

Thick clothes puffing dust and powder, spangles to be sewed on; westering sunlight finding the workroom earlier and earlier every day. Thick bowls of *minestrone* at Moretti's, air thick with weaving drifts of blue smoke. Close stuffiness in the bedroom, scents of cheap cologne and mottled soap and upholstery and cut lemons.

Autumn fogs, wreathing their way silently through the dirty streets and the gray buildings; booming softly, noiselessly in from the sea. Lights lighted in the beauty shops and fruit stalls and delicacy stores when Hildegarde walked to the theatre now, at half-past six; owls and pumpkins and orange lanterns in the confectioners' windows for Allhallowe'en.

They had come back from the Lido, and from Paris sweet with chestnut bloom, they had sailed back on a big steamer gushing light and music into the dark. Sidney was in New England now; going to football games, making friends, wanted everywhere, admired everywhere.

And still he kept his word. He did not write.

But Hildegarde had broken hers. Once, on a hot, odorous August night, suddenly, with a fast-beating heart, with a desperate need, she had written.

Just a dozen lines. Just to tell him that the letters, "of which we spoke," were destroyed. Just to ask that he tell his mother and father, and believe her to be, always his faithfully.

She had sent it in care of the San Mateo address. Had he ever received it? At all events, he had not answered it. She had signed it fully, and had written a return address outside, but it did not come back. And she had not dared write again.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW'S to-day, to begin?" asked Walter Brown.

"To-day," Hildegarde answered, "seems good to me. I'll never be any younger, you know."

"Getting along, eh?" said Mr. Brown, with a swift smile from deep-set black eyes.

"Twenty-two." She was dimpling; she swept him the indifferent, amused look of a quite consciously beautiful woman. A monosyllabic girl; but any one who looked like that didn't have to talk.

"What makes you think you could do it?"

"You mean your society work?"

"Yep."

He was interrupted for the third time in their fifteen-minute interview, and Hildegarde looked about the room appraisingly, as she had looked about the city room before, on her first visit to the newspaper long ago.

It was a different room, the newspaper had moved downtown, and was temporarily housed in a sort of wide shed now, but the atmosphere was the same. Washstands with dirty towels and hot water, long windows looking out upon other sheds and new buildings, long rows of aligned desks, with green lights hanging above them, and clippings and chaff and rubbish of all sorts accumulating about them like a tide.

At most of them in the busiest hour of the early evening men were sprawled, clicking typewriters, or writhing in the agonies of hand-written composition. The air was thick with steam heat, cigarette smoke, and the smell of newspaper, ink, pencil dust, and rubber—the deliciously compounded atmosphere that like the scent of the circus ring to show horses never quite leaves the nostrils of those who love it.

Men came and went, shouting questions, in murmuring

conference, rustling papers, kicking over wire wastebaskets, snatching at telephones. One or two women were more or less in evidence, obviously interested in the pretty girl who was at "Wat's" desk. One a nicely groomed, middle-aged woman, with a wise sweet face, a great favourite with everyone, was addressed affectionately as "Bess." Another was a lean, nervous, prowling type, heavily eyeglassed, exacting.

"I've got to have a window open or I'll be ill!" Hildegard heard her say. "Who took my scratch paper?—I had a pile here. Will you boys please shut that door as soon as you can?"

"Well!" said Mr. Brown, arousing her from her reverie by a sudden return to the subject in hand. "This don't get us anywhere. All right, Miss Sessions! You think you could hold down the society job at thirty a week, is that it?"

"I think I could hold down a rhinoceros for thirty dollars a week," Hildegard responded simply. "I'm getting eighteen!"

"That's the stuff!" said Walter Brown enthusiastically. He ruffled a large sheaf of clippings and notices and envelopes under his hand. "Now here's what you've got to do—it's simple, when you once get the hang. But I've had seven girls on this job in one year," he diverged feverishly, "and I'm almost crazy! The trouble is, if you get a society girl, she's so stuck up she's no dam' good, if you'll excuse my French, and if you get a dub, she doesn't know the names, and she's always getting divorced people mixed up, and so on."

"I know the Burlingame and the San Mateo crowd," Hildegard assured him confidently.

"You do?" he asked, with a sharp, suspicious look.

"I know their names. I know about how they rank."

"My God, if you *do*——!" he muttered incredulously. "Well, anyway, every day we've got to have a column of what they're doing," he resumed. "And we'd like it all new. You know what a scoop is?"

"Of course."

"Well, we'd like those fifteen or eighteen personals to be all scoops, but I don't expect that. You can get some of it

out of the afternoon papers of the day before, and you can get follow-up stuff—go out and interview people, get dinner lists, all that kind of thing. That's every day. Can you do it?"

"I think so," Hildegard answered confidently. "I'm going to be married before very long," her heart sang, "and I won't have to!" But aloud she only added, innocently, "If any one can do it, I should think I could!"

"Then, Thursday nights, you've got to give me my Sunday page," continued Wat. "About five thousand words, but it's only review, a sort of summary of the whole week's social events. And on that day you can put in all the things people send in all week, not the real society dope, but the wedding anniversaries and marriages of the near-stuff, you know what I mean? If they send pictures, we run a special little article with heads—you don't do heads."

"I don't do heads?"

"Write headlines, I mean. Groat or O'Connor or De Fontenay will do that for a while. Now, we've got to have two pictures with each Sunday page," the city editor went on, "and I want those to have some *class* to them. It's a pretty safe rule that if a girl wants to have her picture in the paper, we don't want it—it isn't good enough."

"But then how——"

"Well, you have to work that out. Coax 'em, or work 'em out of the photograph galleries, you can do that. Sometimes, some visitor here—Vice President's daughter or something like that—will let you have one. They act very different in the East about it, but here," Mr. Brown conceded regretfully, "here it isn't the *bon ton*, if you know what I mean, to have your picture in the paper. However, I've got this week's pictures, you don't have to bother about them until next week. Come on, now, what do you say? Is it a go?"

"As far as I'm concerned," Hildegard agreed, after a second of hesitation.

Should she tell him that she was engaged to Sidney Penfield, who was presumably coming home in a few months?

It was October now, and after the lonely winter ahead it seemed to Hildegard that faith and confidence must come back to her with a rush, like the lilac blooms and the heightened blue skies, and the scent of acacia blossoms. Sidney hadn't written, but that didn't mean that he wasn't coming back!

But she decided against telling Mr. Brown of her plans. Why should she? She mightn't be able to suit him, anyway. Or her wedding might be delayed until the fall; it would be quite characteristic of Sidney's mother to suggest that they wait until October.

Meanwhile, she was sick unto death of the Tivoli job, sick of the dirt and the crowding, the pretences and vanities, the tinsel and grease paint of the theatre. And thirty dollars a week was big money.

So she hung up her linen coat, and her round hat with cornflowers ringing it, and smiled her own peculiar and unforgettable smile at the men to whom she was introduced, and said, in her own memorable velvet voice to old friends: "Hello, Jim; hello, Tom; how do you do, Mr. Pincher? How is your little boy?"

And half an hour after she had come in to apply for the position that Lars had told her was again empty, she found herself an accepted member of the *Sun* staff.

A shabby desk was cleared for her, and upon it was installed a typewriter that, except for the accident of its spacer catching about every third time, and its upper-case "N" being broken, obliging its user to fill in all big N's with pencil, was a sufficiently satisfactory instrument.

Great slippery blocks of yellow paper, a stubby pencil, a slim black book lettered in red, and much thumbed and marked as to pages, "The Social Register," and a mass of data, notes, letters, clippings, as a legacy from her predecessor, were Hildegard's equipment. She settled down in the bright hot roar and buzz of the office just as the big clock struck eight, and tried not to feel too self-conscious to be able to concentrate at least partially upon what she was trying to do.

Friendliness, almost to the embarrassment point, encompassed her. She had not been seated five minutes before a middle-aged shirt-sleeved man next to her, grunting, and chewing a ragged moustache, hung far over sideways, to breathe, somewhat alcoholically, in her ear:

"You can always look at the files in the Sunday room, if you want to get a start."

Hildegard thanked him, almost startled with gratitude. She went at once to the Sunday room, already liking the feeling of doing it so comfortably, bare-headed, with a pad of paper and a pencil in hand.

Here again they were wonderfully friendly. Hildegard, with her blue fringed eyes earnestly uplifted, and her cheeks flushed with excitement, and her gold hair roughened about her white forehead, was not destined to be ignored by any man between eighteen and eighty. Everybody wanted to help her, and her first experience with a regular call-down was when the Sunday editor, a fuzzy-headed, lanky youth squinting through strong glasses, shouted unfeelingly to some of her assistants:

"Say, how many of you fellows does it take to show Miss Sessions those files? Do we get that picture to-night, Spike, or don't we?"

But even this terrible person was not hostile.

"I had to jack up those boys, you know," he took occasion to murmur to her confidentially before she left the room. "They'd waste all the time there ever was! No application to you at all, Miss Sessions. You understand that?"

"Oh, perfectly!" she said earnestly, sensibly, her hand on the knob. "It's my first day here."

"Let me open that door for you, it's a little heavy. And next time come straight to me, do you see? I know it's your first day here. I hope everything'll go all right, and I'm sure it will. Wat's a peach when you get to know him."

"I'm sure he is!" Hildegard went back to the corner of the city room that was already dear to her, because it held what she could call "my desk." She began, in a businesslike way, to write.

Easter weddings left society folk small breathing time last week, when a crop of the prettiest brides of many a season bloomed like a garden full of lilies among the old churches of the city and the Peninsula homes of the first families.

The shirt-sleeved man on her left ripped this casually from her machine, when she had reached the end of the half-page of paper that she had been advised would be the acceptable form, and read it with a faintly knitted brow.

"That's all right!" he said approvingly, shifting the unlighted cigar he was chewing, and handing it back. "They'll stand for any amount of that first family guff."

It was a crude compliment, but Hilda's first, and she liked it. Only a few moments later nice, polite Louis de Fontenay came in, and was enchanted to find her installed. And then one of the men she had just met returned from a late supper trip, and spilled a score of round, hot little gingersnaps on her desk.

"Get all you like of 'em down at Bob Garrett's," he assured her, and Hildegard nibbled them as she worked, and felt her heart happier than it had been for many long months. The room got hotter and hotter, the noise more and more deafening, the composing-room men and Sunday-room men rushed back and forth, telephones trilled, and the Morse receiver clicked; to-morrow's paper was in the throes of birth, and everybody was needed at once.

At half-past eleven, blundering in, Lars found Hildegard flushed and weary, her hair tousled, her fingers dirty, her desk embedded, as were all the rest, in a rising tide of torn and crumpled paper.

But glittering in her shadowed blue eyes was a wild light of satisfaction, a light that meant that at last hand and heart and mind had found their place.

He and two or three other young men took her out at midnight for coffee and doughnuts in a tiled Market Street stand, and then Lars walked home with her under a soft autumn moon and a gray, pebbled sky.

"One o'clock, Hilda."

"But I shan't be this late usually, Lars. This is Thursday."

She almost sang the words, and he looked at her approvingly.

"You like it, don't you?"

"Love it!"

"It wasn't too hot and dirty and noisy for you, Hilda?"

"Oh, no. I adore that sort of thing. I can't—I really can't tell you how grateful I am for your recommending me, Lars."

"I didn't recommend you. Wat asked me if I remembered your asking for a job——"

"A job, darling!"

"A job. You think you're so smart. You try Danish once. Say, Hilda, aren't you going to tell him of your engagement?—don't you think you should?"

Her bright mood quieted, her radiant face darkened, even the dancing step slowed itself to a different rhythm.

"I don't think so, Lars. Would you?"

"Well—if he likes you so much, and you're so happy. Penfield will be back in June, won't he?"

"I suppose so! But this only October!" she said, confident again. Life seemed good to-night, to Hilda, between her new job, and Sidney's coming home in so much less than a year.

"Well, then——"

"But, of course, we might not be married at once," Hilda went on, thrilling. "I'd have to get clothes—there are always plans—— It means more to me than you have any idea, to have a newspaper position," she went on. "There's a background to it, a sort of dignity——"

"I can see that!" Lars conceded, in the pause.

"Don't say anything about it on the *Sun*," Hildegard pleaded, in her own doorway. "Please—to protect me——"

"What makes you think you have to tease me?" Lars interrupted, almost roughly. "Of course I want you to be happy. Of course I'd rather have you work on the *Sun* and

make good than marry that fellow that has always had millions——”

“Ah, be fair to him, Lars!”

“Fair to him. Why, in God’s name, should I do anything for him one way or another? He’s nothing to me, nor I to him. He’s always had money enough to buy everything he wants.”

A silence. They stood perfectly still in the dark doorway.

“Including me, I suppose you mean?”

“Well, of course, you’d marry him if he didn’t have a cent!”

Hilda was stunned with surprise.

“Of course I would! Sidney? Why, I wish he hadn’t.”

“I believe that, certainly!” Lars said haughtily, trembling. He took his big gloves out of his overcoat pocket, put them on, took them off and put them away again. Somehow there was always something extremely pathetic to Hilda in the sight of Lars’s gloves. He was not the type of man to wear gloves. He belonged on a salt-crust, rocking deck, with the wet winds blowing his yellow hair about, and his big red hands, covered with blond fuzz, manipulating ropes and spars.

“I don’t care whether you believe it or not,” Hilda said, still too much astonished to be angry. “But I *must* say I’m surprised,” she went on maternally, “to have you speak so of someone you hardly know—someone who has never done anything mean to you, but who, on the contrary, has always spoken of you *most* kindly——”

“I don’t care how he speaks of me!” Lars almost shouted.

“Well, you ought to, because——” Hilda suddenly melted. She laid a little gloved hand upon Lars’s big sleeve. He never would wear an overcoat, and he never seemed to be cold, but to-night the thinness of the fabric startled her, and she diverged. “Lars, won’t you get yourself a new suit?”

“I could buy myself a new suit every week and never know it!” the man said ungraciously and impatiently.

“Well, of course you could! But what I was going to say was that you ought to like Sidney, because he’s going to be my husband, and you’re one of my oldest, oldest friends—

and you are going to come down and visit us a lot," Hildegard resumed, shining eyes uplifted to his, little figure close beside his enormous one in the shadowy doorway.

"You're very kind," the man said, choking, with an abrupt military bow. "But I think I will not often trouble the Penfields with my company."

"What a silly way to talk! What have you got against the Penfields?"

"Only what I have against the whole lot of them!" he muttered.

"Well, you oughtn't to have anything against them in this city," Hilda retorted with spirit, "because everyone knows that San Francisco is a town absolutely run by labour, and that labour has everything its own way here——"

"Oh, don't be a fool, Hilda," Lars said gently.

She tried more subtle tactics; spoke with treacherous gentleness.

"Lars, you used to like me. Don't you like me any more?"

"Now you are reminding me that twice—twice——"

Laughter bubbled beneath her demure voice. She loved to tease him.

"Three times!"

"Three times," he said, trying to laugh, speaking between gritted teeth, "three times I have told you that I love you."

Hildegard was shamed into seriousness by the misery in his voice. It was a deep voice, with a wild sea note in it, the voice of a viking.

"But why do you want me?" she questioned ashamedly, very low. "Nobody in the world knows as much about me as you do. And you know that I'm engaged to another man."

"I don't know why," Lars said simply.

"Does it make you unhappy?" Hildegard questioned, in a small, shy voice. She saw him two or three times a week, he sometimes paid for her dinner and sometimes did not, he often scolded or criticized her, and even sometimes ignored her, and spent his dinner hour wrangling in a foreign tongue

with the wild-looking men that she identified as belonging to the Party, without addressing a word to her. But she always felt that he was watching her—happiest when she was in his sight.

"Oh, no, I like to feel that you are the most beautiful woman in the world—and the most wonderful!" he said now, patiently, scornfully, "and that I never may have you—because——"

"Because?"

"Of him, I suppose."

"And do you really think me that, Lars?" the girl asked, pleased to think that she might bring so much of beauty and charm to Sidney, at least.

"Oh, don't be silly! Everyone knows it," Lars said irritably.

"Lars, you don't think so?"

"I? What does it matter what I think? But look about you, Hilda," the man said sharply, "and don't act the woman!"

"Act the woman! Good heavens, I've^{*} never pretended to be anything else but a woman! And I will say, Lars—I will say, my dear," Hildegard ended, with the familiarity of long friendship, and on a note of laughter, "that when it comes to paying compliments—you may not have a very polished manner—but nobody—*nobody* ever says prettier things to me than you do!"

And, standing on the step above him in the dim light that shone from the street, with the opened door behind her, she leaned forward, caught his shoulder with her fingers, and brushed a butterfly kiss against his big cheek.

Then she turned and fled, running toward the stairway. As late as this there was no elevator, and she must climb the two flights.

And instantly she knew that she had made a mistake, and a primitive terror seized her. He had followed her in three great strides, she was as helpless as a baby in his big arms, and kisses whose swiftness and violence actually robbed her of breath were smothering and choking and frightening her.

After a long, terrible minute he stood her upon her feet rather than merely released her, steadied her, and stood holding her with big fingers, panting, staring at her.

"You dare!" Hildegard gasped.

"Yes, I dare! I'll take you—if I want you——"

"Lars!" she hissed, aghast, in a long silence.

Again they stood panting, staring at each other, the man's big fingers still clamped to her arm.

"I'm sorry," Lars whispered then, confusedly. "You mustn't mind me—you know I'd not touch you! Don't be angry——"

He freed her arm, and Hildegard, backing, and staring at him as if she were fascinated, and as if she feared that he might follow her, began to mount the stairs.

"Good-night!" she called down, from the landing.

He was standing, looking after her, his big leonine head a little fallen forward, his eyes intent. He did not stir or answer. Oddly happy, oddly frightened, oddly touched, Hildegard moved slowly from his sight. But instantly afterward she broke into a wild run for Pidgy's room and safety. It was long after one o'clock now.

Her heart was a delicious whirl of excitement. She had a newspaper job! She was doing work she loved at last. The men liked her, they had been delightfully kind and encouraging. And when all was said and done, she was engaged to Sidney Penfield. She was one of the luckiest girls in the world.

CHAPTER XXVII

JUST before Christmas there occurred in the office of the *Sun* one of those unfortunate days that seem peculiarly characteristic of newspaper offices. Hildegarde had held her beloved job for nine weeks now, and had been working hard, and with apparent success. But she had already had glimpses of the fashion in which matters went wrong in the City Room; she had heard Wat rage, seen various associates cower, and listened to their sullen mutterings. She knew now the general suffering that another, and a rival, newspaper's "scoop" of some titbit of news occasioned, and she quite appreciated that her own work was a hundred times more difficult and exacting than it had sounded when the editor first described it to her.

To fill a column with social notes one day, or two days, a week, would have been nothing. There was always enough promising matter in the social columns of the other papers to stimulate her to find additional notes of her own. If Mrs. Rodney Sutherland was giving her daughter a coming-out tea, the list of the girls receiving with Miss Sutherland must be had, the list of dinners following the affair, the list of luncheons and smaller teas that would be evoked in honour of Miss Sutherland.

But the difficulty lay in the need for a column every day, and in the fact that one woman, and that woman as strange to the work as Hildegarde, could hardly hope to cover the whole field. Zoe Broderick, who did social work for one of the other papers, had twelve years of experience behind her, had scouts and informers, sources of inside information in a dozen places. A third paper kept one girl in Hildegarde's position, to manage the office end of the affair, and paid a

certain society matron well to telephone in hints and suggestions two or three times a week.

Hildegard found it impossible to cope successfully with these long-established rivals. While she was persuading a photographer to give her prints for the Sunday edition, or hurrying out to obtain the details of some dinner or tea, an important affair would quietly slip through her fingers, and her first glance at the rival papers in the morning would make her heart sick with despair.

"How 'bout that Grainger thing? Why didn't we get it?" Wat would ask her, when she went by his desk to her own.

"That's a divorce, Mr. Brown. I didn't know——"

"Well, for God's sake, then, wake up, and know the next time, Miss Sessions! Divorces are news, just as much as engagements are."

Perhaps she would venture a retort.

"But they're not social news, are they?"

This, however, never paid. The city editor was too often only looking for an opportunity to growl.

"Social news! Hear her! No, and if one of the Brocks or Chattertons murdered each other, it wouldn't be social news either! And I suppose you'd stumble over the body and come in here without reporting it, simply because it wasn't a pink tea! My Lord—sometimes I wish I'd stayed in the furniture business with my wife's father, the way you people go on! Selby leaves the ball game five minutes before the grand stand catches fire, and you come in to say that the Grainger divorce isn't social news!"

He could keep up these tirades for a long time, and Hildegard, with the rest of the office staff, came to dread them. She would sit at her typewriter, her head bowed, her ears scarlet, while the storm raged on, and the men would murmur, devote themselves to their work, glance furtively over their shoulders to estimate the situation along the battle front, and bend over their scratch pads again.

"If you can't do this, Miss Sessions, say so, and I'll get somebody who can!" Wat would generally conclude. And

Hildegarde, inwardly raging, would solace her soul by imagining herself as furiously throwing up the horrible old job, and the thirty a week, and stalking out of the office right before his eyes.

Five minutes of vocal silence, punctured by the clicking of typewriters, would follow the outburst, and then by degrees the men would begin to talk in low and then more confident tones, until presently the atmosphere of the office would reach its normal tenor again, shouts, banging of doors, laughter, cigarettes. And usually Wat made some crude attempt at apology to Hilda, and Hilda met him halfway.

Perhaps he would leave his desk and come to hers, instead of summoning her with the customary shout of "Say—Hildegarde Sessions, come here!"

"Can you cover that dance at the Palace to-night?" he would ask gruffly.

Hildegarde would wheel in her chair sharply, raise stony blue eyes.

"Excuse me, were you speaking to me, Mr. Brown?"

Everybody in the neighbourhood would be deeply absorbed in work now; yet everyone keenly enjoyed the sight of Miss Sessions with her temper up, and nobody missed a word.

"How 'bout the dance at the Palace to-night?"

"Certainly."

She would whirl back to her work, click out a word or two.

"If I don't give this room hell," Brown might plead lamely, "I get hell from Sanderson, d'you see?"

Perhaps, in sheer generosity, in pleasure at having the atmosphere cleared again, she would dimple, she would reassure him with a friendly nod. Perhaps, if he had been more than ordinarily insulting, she would not unbend for another sentence or two. But in the end they were always friends, and Hildegarde speedily came to be recognized in the office as a favourite with the snappy, unreasonable, excitable, and temperamental city editor.

But on the dark, grimy December morning when the City Room was plunged into a general despair, Wat's own standing

was jeopardized, and an appalling murmur to the effect that he himself was to be fired was going the rounds. Sanderson, the assistant editor-in-chief, was supposedly to be demoted to the City Room, some unknown and therefore disliked man from Chicago, with a tremendous reputation, was coming to take Sanderson's place, and all Wat's special favourites would fall with him, under the knife of a general upheaval and change.

Wat himself, who had been on a party all the night before, was brooding sulphurously at his desk, when Hildegard came into an office filled with darkest forebodings at twelve o'clock. No noise, no laughter, to-day. The men formed in little knots, spoke briefly and furtively, and dispersed to unusually ostentatious and industrious labours. Miss Pearlle, who did women's clubs, school affairs, lectures, music, and art exhibitions, was weeping over her notes, between vicious punches of her typewriter. There was no question about one thing, at least, after ten years in which, according to her own representations, she had practically held the whole newspaper together, she was fired.

Spike Newhall, who did sports, and who was a favourite with Sanderson, attempted single-handed to raise the general atmosphere. But in vain. Everybody's head was threatened to-day, and such conversation as flourished in uncomfortable and sporadic undertones dealt with the general rottenness of the *Sun* as a news sheet anyway, and the speaker's immediate hopes of a better job elsewhere.

"Say, Sanderson wants to see you in his office, Miss Sessions," Wat presently said gloomily to Hildegard, eyeing a pencilled note from the supreme power just delivered by a dispassionate and snuffing boy. Hildegard's heart sank to her shoes; this meant dismissal, of course. She could tell, from the sympathetic glances that met her own glance on all sides, that the entire office so construed it.

But she held up her head, glanced at herself in a mirror, washed her hands, and presented herself at the office of the assistant editor-in-chief with as courageous a front as she could manage. What if he did fire her? She wasn't going

to starve just because the *Sun* expected impossibilities of its staff.

Sanderson was a florid, heavy-jowled man, chronically annoyed. Everybody knew that he and his wife didn't get along at all well, and that he was vain, much older than she, and consequently jealous and unsure of himself.

He scowled at Hildegarde when she came in, and went on talking to a young man who sat opposite him. Hildegarde took a third chair and waited. She told herself that she was not in the least frightened.

"Follow that up, will you, Smith?"

"I sure will, Mr. Sanderson."

"Tell her he squealed, see?"

"Sure."

"Then get to him before she can communicate with him, and tell *him* she did, see?"

"Sure. But she might 'phone him, right there?"

"Nope. Her 'phone's out of order. We fixed that. Work fast now, won't you, Smith, and then we can put on the screws."

"Sure."

Smith went out, but Sanderson did not immediately speak to Hildegarde. He answered the telephone, and deliberately took a sheaf of papers from a drawer. Newspaper clippings, with letters fastened to them by clips.

"Miss Sessions," said Sanderson, with a quick ugly roll of his eyes in her direction, "here's something you've got to clear up for us—one of those things that no newspaper can afford to have happen. Mr. Rogers spoke to me about it."

Hildegarde froze to her seat with terror. What was he talking about?

"You did some club work for Miss Pearlie last week?" Sanderson asked.

The girl was quaking inwardly. She nodded without speaking.

"Well, the women's clubs are going to sue the paper. You've let us in for something!" Sanderson stated briefly, with bitter satisfaction.

"Sue——?" she whispered, swallowing.

"You know, we can't afford this sort of thing—no paper can!" the man said, throwing the sheaf of documents down before her.

The room was going around. Hildegardie steadied herself with a grip of fingers on her chair arms. She could find no voice.

"What," said the editor drily, "are those statements of yours based upon?"

Hildegardie tried to read the clippings; she was too agitated to see them clearly. Miss Pearlle, growing more arrogant and exacting day by day, had requested that the social editor give her some help, a few days ago, with a convention of women's clubs, and this unthinkable thing was apparently the outcome.

"*Did* any of the women walk out of the room?" Sanderson asked shrewdly.

She managed to grasp at a headline.

Local Club Woman Brands Wife of Arizona Governor as Dowdy.
Club Members Leave Room in Indignation.

"Well, yes—they did. They did walk out."

"Who were they?"

"Why—I don't know. I just saw—I just saw three or four of them——"

"Three or four! Your article says scores."

"No, not scores, I said 'several.'"

"And how did you know they walked out in indignation?"

"I heard them. That is, I heard one woman saying that she thought it was a mistake to criticize the wife of the Arizona governor, because she had been so good to the visiting club women."

"But you don't know who this woman was?"

"No, sir." Hildegardie's voice was very small.

"And you called that 'indignation,' eh?"

"No, I didn't." Hildegardie swallowed hard. "I didn't think it was so important," she pleaded. "It was at the end

of my story; I just reported it, like everything else. I said that at the end of the meeting this Eastern delegate got up and made a sort of funny speech about the State Convention last month, and that she said the wife of the Arizona governor wore a heavy sportscoat and a little piqué hat to the reception, and that it seemed funny, because the California women were all in full dress, and looked so stunning! And then I saw these women going out, and as they passed me, one said she thought it was a shame to criticize any woman for her dress, and that it was one of the things that made women's clubs ridiculous."

"It was the end of the meeting, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then, how did you know that they weren't going out anyway?"

A pause. Then: "Well, I didn't," Hildegard admitted lamely.

"Exactly!" He indicated the documents with a sweeping gesture. "And so now I get this furious letter from the president of the whole thing."

"Well," Hildegard offered in self-defence, "I had no idea that Mr. Brown was going to play it up that way with heads, and at the top of the story. I was astonished when I saw the way it had been run."

"You know we are making some changes on the paper?" Sanderson asked slowly, gathering up the clippings again.

"Yes, sir," Hildegard said, her heart lead.

"Well, I will turn this report over to Mr. Rogers," said the assistant editor-in-chief. Rogers was the manager and editor-in-chief, a person exalted even beyond mention, in the City Room, a power, who lived behind a series of closed doors, and whose very person was known to but a few of Hildegard's crowd. Rogers was always in Washington, or in Chicago, or was seeing the Governor in Sacramento; Hildegard was paralyzed at the thought of her little name being mentioned in Rogers's presence, on any grounds. "One moment, please——" Sanderson said, as she stirred.

Hildegarde sat motionless, in a long silence, while he ruffled and shuffled the papers, frowning darkly.

"That's all," he said presently. And Hildegarde, beaten and exhausted, went back to the City Room.

Ordinarily, as she returned, there might have been indications of sympathy, there might have been reassurances. The younger men might have gathered about her with frank comment and speculation that would have eased her full heart in spite of herself. Wat might have found a kindly word, and her shirt-sleeved neighbour, the veteran reporter of them all, might have completely restored her balance with guffaws of disrespectful laughter.

"Don't you worry about those hens in the women's clubs, Miss Sessions! They're always getting hurt feelings, and always writing letters. Rogers never even heard of this, and Sanderson was only trying to scare you! You'll never hear of it again!" he would have said.

But to-day was not an ordinary day. Gloom and foreboding hung over the office to-day; the ax that had presumably fallen on Hildegarde might be awaiting any one of them. Wat Brown looked sick and held his pallid forehead as he worked. The men took their assignments quietly, picked their hats from the hooks, disappeared.

Cold, dark, gray outside, rain was falling. The radiators droned and clanked, the air was thick with smoke and pencil dust. Hildegarde, looking over her notes, felt an utter depression begin to seize upon her.

Her back ached, and her feet were icy cold. She had lost her rubbers again, or perhaps Pidgy had borrowed them. Pigdy and her mother had gone away for a three weeks' tour, and Hildegarde had invited a girl of her own age, Anita Leonard, to stay with her in their absence. But Anita couldn't come until to-morrow night, so to-night Hilda must go to an empty, unaired, lonesome flat.

She couldn't get to Moretti's to-night, and perhaps see Lars, and cheer herself up a little with the general chatter of the long table. This was a Thursday, and the horrible full

page must be managed somehow. She had done some pages of it, odd detached paragraphs, during the week, but the summing up was still to do, and Hildegard felt too weary, too deeply discouraged, too utterly demoralized to begin it.

Her one overwhelming desire was to cry. Indeed, to her horror, as she worked, she found herself crying quietly, wiping away occasional tears that would not be swallowed and suppressed. And she knew that the boys saw it and put their own construction upon it.

Well, if she wasn't fired, she was in so much deeper trouble with these vicious club women, that she might as well have been! Let them think what they liked.

Christmas is distinctly the hour of the junior members of the social group, and merrymaking of a decidedly juvenile order marks the happy calendar of the week's events. Except for the formal reception on Thursday, when Miss Elinor Eldridge will make her bow to her mother's friends, the scheduled affairs are of a family nature——

"Oh, blah—blah!—blah!" thought Hildegard^{ed}, deep in her soul. She hammered her typewriter mechanically. She should have gotten the list of the Meredith bridesmaids today; Elizabeth Meredith was to be married on the day after New Year's, she must have made all arrangements by this time.

The office was very hot; too brightly flooded with light. Outside the dirty, high, uncurtained windows, the rain was falling—falling. A grimy boy, spattered with rain, brought in the afternoon paper, a dozen copies of it, and the various heads of departments began to seek for the news in their own particular fields.

Five minutes later, Hildegard heard Wat Brown's voice.

"How's it happen that you didn't get this engagement, Miss Sessions? Say—this is getting pretty raw——"

"What engagement?"

"It says Peninsula society has known of it unofficially for several months!" the city editor said, walking to her desk, his face actually pale. "We can't have this kind of thing!"

"Who is it?" Hildegarde asked, her own face paling. Another calamity upon this frightful day would certainly end everything.

"One of the Penfields, that's who it is."

"Helen, is it? I've known——" Hildegarde began defensively and stopped short. "I've known of that for months!" she had been about to say. But it occurred to her suddenly that this would afford no particular defence in the present crisis, and she fell to stricken silence, staring aghast at the editor.

"It's one of them!" Brown said. "My God!—they're the most important people in the whole set! I'm not trying to rub it into you, Miss Sessions, but upon my word——"

"They've all been in the East—it probably was announced there!" Hildegarde stammered. "The man is an Eastern man—Choate."

What had she been thinking of, not to follow up Helen Penfield's engagement? She had known of it a whole year ago, she might easily have scooped it, to her everlasting glory.

Her eye fell upon the newspaper. That wasn't Helen's picture—unless Helen had changed——

Miss Anne Estes Paget. Mr. Sidney Penfield. What was this all about—what was this all about? . . .

The bright lights, the voices, the clicking of typewriters seemed suddenly to strike her on the crown of the head, like a blow. Her mouth filled with water, and her throat thickened.

Not to faint—not to faint——

Oh, but this couldn't be! It was a mistake. They couldn't mean that Sidney—— This was a mistake.

Anne Estes Paget, that was Peggy Paget's sister Nancy. Nancy Paget—announcing her engagement to Sidney Penfield. Hildegarde could hear the city editor's voice, but not his words. When he went back to his desk she picked up the paper.

At an elaborate and beautiful reception in the Paget home in Boston yesterday an engagement of deep interest to San Franciscans was announced.

Hildegarde felt that her breast was bursting. She was dying.

This couldn't be, though. There was some mistake.

Miss Paget, remembered here as one of last season's most fêted visitors—remembered here as one of last season's most fêted visitors——

Peggy's sister and Sidney! Announcing their engagement!

There was a drumming in her ears, blood pounding—pounding in her heart. Nancy Paget—ah, she was pretty. Such a dainty, fairy-like little creature, with deep, dark eyes. A beautiful figure, and such a happy, confident little face.

Hildegarde crushed the paper suddenly, began to type-write. She glanced at notes, flung discarded sheets of yellow paper into the brimming scrap basket.

"Say, Miss Sessions!"

"Yes, Mr. Brown?"

"Make some mention of that Penfield engagement, won't you? That's the least we can do now."

"I will."

Clickety—clickety—click. Sidney Penfield engaged to Peggy's sister. Natural enough. They had all been abroad together. They must have had fun.

She ripped a page out of the typewriter, inserted a fresh sheet. It made one feel a little dazed, sudden news like that. Made one's head ache dully—her head had been aching all afternoon, anyway.

But this couldn't be true. There must be some mistake.

Sidney couldn't do a brutal thing like that—he was too fine. Clean-shaven, tall, beautifully dressed and groomed, the touch of his tweed coat so comforting, the faint aroma of shaving soap and talcum powder reaching her when his arms were about her. . . .

So much the most wonderful, the most masterful and winning person she had ever met—he *couldn't* do that!

He had always brought her violets when they had had tea together. He had never wanted to slip away into inconspic-

uous places, he had met his girl openly, radiantly, in full view of the drifting crowds that went through the foyers of the big hotels. Orange pekoe and cinnamon toast.

"Oh, I don't believe it!" Hildegard said, half aloud.

The office was almost empty now; the men who had brought in late afternoon stories had written them, and turned them in, and gone off for dinner; the men on evening stories had not yet arrived. The big straggling room was hot, bright, disorderly, the floor deep in rubbish. It was half-past nine o'clock. In the adjoining room Hildegard could hear the presses plunging, racketing, plunging.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PRESENTLY she carried to the city editor's desk the thick block of typewritten script that was the Sunday page. The photographs had been handed in several days ago.

Wat Brown looked up sourly; his expression changed, he looked concerned, alarmed.

"Say, you don't look a bit well, Miss Sessions!"

"I'm—all right." The sympathy almost unnerved her.

"I rode you kinder hard, maybe. But we can't let big stories like that get by, you know."

"I—of course, I understand!"

"You mustn't get discouraged, things will go wrong, as the feller says."

"That's all right." Her voice was rather faint, she smiled vaguely, dazedly, as she turned away.

"You'll get some dinner now?"

"Yes, I've finished."

He looked at her once more, uneasily, as she languidly lifted down her little hat from its hook, mashed it upon her bright head without glancing at the mirror, draggingly slipped into her big coat. The girl looked sick, he thought.

But she went quietly enough through the glass-panelled doorway, and in another second he had forgotten all about her in the pressure of uncomfortable details that remained to him in this most ill-starred day.

Hildegarde did not stop for dinner; she did not even see the oyster stalls and coffee houses that might have attracted her. She walked for a while, not quite knowing where, sometimes pacing rapidly, sometimes stopping short, and speaking half aloud in the dark street:

"But it must be some mistake!"

Presently she found herself mounting her own stairs, and in the little apartment. She undressed herself as usual, brushed her hair, washed face and hands.

All this went heavily; Hildegarde would stop for whole minutes together, staring ahead of her blindly.

"Sidney—Sidney—you didn't do that!"

She got into bed, lay wakeful. Hour after hour after hour.

Agonies swept over her. The agony of loss. The agony of bitter jealousy. The agony of love.

That handsome face of his, smiling at another girl. His arm about Nancy Paget. Sidney, magnificent in evening dress, waiting somewhere in a beautiful big hallway, now, for Nancy to flutter downstairs. . . .

Hildegarde flung one arm above her head in the dark, panting, her face burning, her head ready to split with pain.

"I can't bear it!" she whispered, over and over again.

Happy, young, rich, beautiful, admired, and congratulated by all their distinguished circle. Sidney Penfield and Nancy Paget, Peggy and Jay for an enthusiastic chorus. The Pagnets pleased. The Penfields pleased.

Everybody pleased except one wretched girl, one struggling newspaper reporter, deserted and heartbroken and forgotten, lying flat and tearless upon a shabby, lifeless bed in a crowded, dingy apartment in a dirty street. Only tears and despair and pain for her. Only days and days and days ahead, whose dragging wretchedness sickened her, even in contemplation.

"I can't bear it!" Hildegarde whispered, writhing.

The water, out at Baker's Beach, she remembered suddenly, was still brimming in over the big rocks; rough water, that would snatch away the hold of anything so contemptibly feeble as struggling human feet. Just a little way from shore, just the length of this hot, headachy bedroom from shore, it would deepen suddenly——

The sand would seem to fall away; there would be nothing to grasp, nothing by which to steady one's self. It would be all water, harsh, deep, salty walls of it, tumbling and plunging.

Cool and restful. And it would be nobody's business any more whether one was a success or not. Nobody could hurt the limp thing that would presently be sliding loosely about in that water; Sanderson could not fire Miss Sessions then. Hildegard would not have to read, week after week after week, of the Penfield nuptials then.

She began hurriedly, at first with a certain irresolution, then with a continual deepening of intention, to dress. Her head was buzzing, confusing and delaying her. But she felt that if once she could get out to the shore, could scramble down the steep face of the cliff, could get close to the incoming, racing levels of the clean, sweet, deep water, she would find peace.

Beyond it would be the wide stretches of the ocean—far, far, far-stretching into cool winter dimness. No girl, however good a swimmer, could live five minutes—one minute, in all that churning world of cruel, tireless green breakers.

"I won't get into it, of course," Hildegard told herself excitedly. "I'll be afraid, when I get there. But I'll see it. I'll touch it."

It was bewildering, when she got down to the street, to find broad daylight. Had it not been night when she went upstairs? Surely it had. She remembered that the clocks had stood at ten when she gave her Sunday page to Mr. Brown.

They were at eleven now, it was day, although it was so dark, under a pall of fog, that lights were lighted in the delicatessen store windows. Eleven o'clock—was it mid-morning? But it couldn't be, for if it were, she would have had breakfast, and she had had no breakfast. She should be ravenously hungry, too, for she had forgotten dinner.

But, as a matter of fact, she was not, so that something was all wrong. Hildegard would not think it out. Her head ached too heavily, and she was concerned with but one thing, after all—to get to the beach and watch the waves curl in over the sharp teeth of the rocks.

Not the Cliff House beach, that was wide and flat, with the tides making interlocking circles on it, mile after mile after mile. But Baker's Beach, where the water was rough, and

where a great cliff hid the strand, and where one could tell by the dark emerald of the cruel swirling pools between the rocks, that there would be no sand beneath one's feet, only water—water—water, cold and salt and choking, down, down, down to the very bottom of the ocean.

"I won't get into it, of course," Hildegard said, "because I'll be afraid. But I'll see it. I'll touch it!"

She felt excited and confident and almost happy. She need not think about Sidney now, or the club women, or Wat or Sanderson or anything else that was hard. She need not even be jealous of Peggy. The water would answer all that, and perhaps her head would stop aching, and certainly her face would not burn so, or her back hurt so wearily.

"Perhaps I won't be afraid!" she said.

She laughed, with sheer excitement, and the conductor, who was near enough to hear her, glanced at her surprisedly. Hildegard had taken an outside seat toward the front of the car, she was looking with apparent interest at the fog-shrouded streets and the fogged windows already wreathed for Christmas, and the shopping women, coming and going.

"Thinkin' about something pleasant, huh?" he asked.

"Yes, I was thinking about the ocean!" Hildegard said. And immediately her face grew sober, grew scared. Speaking aloud made her feel strangely giddy, almost as if the top of her head were coming off. That was because she had had no breakfast. She wished suddenly she had stopped for it somewhere, for coffee might have braced her to walk straight out into the water, between the rocks, and through the heavy sea fog. As it was, she was afraid she might not have courage enough for that.

"Ocean's a pretty good place to keep away from to-day," the conductor, having turned a corner, and hammered a gong, said with a somewhat curious glance.

"Not for me!" Hildegard answered, with a sudden exultant smile. But his look in return made her uneasy; she must not betray herself, she was acting foolishly. This man might suspect something.

Her head was much better now, and she did not feel so

tried, only a little giddy, a little light-headed. It was so pleasant, riding along idly on a foggy soft morning, with her big coat buttoned up.

"Doesn't this car go to Baker's Beach?" she asked suddenly.

"No, ma'am. This is a Cliff House car."

"Oh? But can I transfer?"

"Not here you can't. I can give you a transfer, but you'll have to walk back to Devisadero."

"I'd better do that." Hildegard took the transfer, and got off the car, a little bewildered, in an unfamiliar neighbourhood. She began to walk back, stopped, smiling. Ridiculous to walk six blocks to save five cents, when her purse had plenty of money in it, and in a little while—if her courage didn't fail her!—she would need no money at all.

"But I'm afraid I'll be scared when I get there," she said aloud, turning down a hilly block that ended, only two crossings away, with the crumbling wall and shabby cedars of an old cemetery. A group of big buildings on her right; brick, rough plaster. . . .

She knew those buildings. This was the Children's Hospital; the big, round wing, reached by a covered high passage, and roofed with a great bubble of glass, was the "Little Jim Ward" for incurable cases, where darling little patient Mabel had been sent so many years ago.

On the day he first took Hildegard to the Montgomerys' in Belvedere, Rudy had stopped here, to see his younger daughter. And Hildegard had thought that she would like to be a nurse, in that warm, busy, well-ordered atmosphere.

She stood still in the foggy street, staring up at it. Where was Mabel now? How many months or years had she been a prisoner there? Suppose she, Hildegard, had never gone to Belvedere?

Sanderson had talked of lawsuits, had hinted that she would lose her job on the *Sun*. Sidney Penfield wasn't going to marry her at all, wasn't going to install little shabby, obscure Hildegard Sessions in all the beauty and luxury of "Broadhall." He was engaged to Nancy Paget. And Hilde-

garde was going out to the beach, out to the big quiet rocks, to think about it. To think about it.

For she couldn't think about it now. She could say the phrases, but they didn't seem to mean anything. Her head felt confused and light when she tried to put any meaning on the words.

Suppose she walked into the hospital, there was no hurry about the beach, unless she found herself beginning to think too soon—suppose she walked into the hospital, and asked them about the case of Mabel Sessions. Suppose they looked it up and said that Mabel was dead?

"It wouldn't be fair to have her dead," Hildegard said, slowly walking toward the upper entrance. "She never had anything—poor kid!"

The warmth of the drug-scented air, inside the big entrance, rather dazed her. When she questioned the uniformed nurse who was quietly studying at a desk in the hall, Hildegard had to catch the desk with tensed finger-tips, to steady herself.

"I wonder if you could tell me—I had a sister here some years ago. Mabel Sessions——"

The nurse, who had looked up alertly, had begun to shake her head slowly from side to side. But at the name, she stopped and looked interested.

"I was going to tell you that I'm only an undergraduate and don't remember any old cases," she said brightly. "But, of course, I know Mabel! You're her sister?"

Hildegard stared at her, her heavy eyes widening in their delicate rings of violet shadow.

"She's not still here?" she faltered.

"Oh, indeed she is," said the nurse. "And although it isn't a regular visiting day, I believe they'll let you see her," she added.

She went away, returning almost immediately, with a smile that brought her reply.

"In Ward Three—third floor. They'll tell you up there," she said.

Hildegard went toward the elevator. The faint scent of

ether was stronger now, everything seemed tinged with it; the boy in the car, the nurse who got on with a wheeled truck of tumbled linen, the doctor who murmured to an elderly nurse about "absorption."

Third Floor. Ward Three. A long bright room with fog pressing gently against all the windows. Children listless and vacant among the rocking horses and blocks and picture books.

And a young girl standing at a window, slender, a little stooped to meet the cane on which she leaned, with a soft braid of dark hair hanging on her shoulders.

"Here's a visitor for you, Mabel!" said a nurse.

"Not for *me*?"

The girl wheeled, and Hildegard saw an exquisite, wistful face lighted with dark eyes, eyes that searched her own with no trace of recognition.

"Mabel——" she faltered, holding out her arms. "It's Hildegard!"

For a second the girl stood wavering, unsteady on her stick, her doubtful eyes moving from the nurse to Hildegard and back again. Then the tears came, and she smiled through them in the old fashion Hildegard remembered of the little fat, dirty-faced Maybill of Bay Lane ten years ago. The cane struck the floor with a sharp bang, and with a cry Mabel had reached her sister, and was clinging to her as if she never could let go, and was sobbing and laughing at once, with her wet face against Hildegard's own.

The nurse engineered them to Mabel's room, a small, clean apartment with one fog-filled window and one straight narrow bed, and Mabel consented to lie down, but with her hand still locked fast in Hildegard's and her hungry eyes able constantly to feast on Hildegard's face.

"Hilda—but you've grown so beautiful! Only you're thin, and you look tired. Have you been away? Have you been working too hard?"

"Don't talk of me, sweetheart. Tell me about you. You've been here all these years?"

"Nine years."

"Mabel! And have you suffered horribly?"

"Oh, no—not any more. But, Hilda, I can't believe it's you—you sitting here beside me, my own sister! You don't know how I've prayed—prayed that you'd walk in, just as you did a few minutes ago, and ask for me! I got so discouraged——"

There was no discouragement in the look that illumined the little face on the pillow, however. Hildegard, sitting beside her, impulsively bent to kiss it.

"Ah, Hilda—don't go away from me again!" Mabel pleaded. "I've thought of you more than of all the others put together. Sometimes I've imagined that you were in trouble, or far away, or even married, but I've always hoped—hoped!—that you'd come see me some day, and that——"

She stopped, choked with tears again, in spite of her smile, looking down, patting Hildegard's hand.

"If I had dreamed you were *here*, darling! But I supposed, that, of course, you were home long ago. I only stopped by chance to-day, because I was in the neighbourhood."

"But, then, weren't *you* home, Hilda?" the younger girl asked in astonishment.

"I? I've not seen Mama for six—more than six years. You don't mean," Hildegard asked in turn, "that they haven't come to see you?"

"They're in Los Angeles, you know," Mabel answered, shaking her head. And suddenly she burst out crying. "*Nobody's* come to see me!" she sobbed childishly. "Nobody!"

Hildegard slid to her knees on the floor beside the bed, put her arms tight about the little figure.

"Don't cry, my darling!" she begged, in a very frenzy of anxiety. "Don't, Mabs!"

"Oh, that's what you used to call me," Mabel said, laughing through her tears. "It sounds so good!"

"And I used to slap you when you cried," Hildegard said lovingly. "And I'll do it now, too, if you don't stop!"

"Hilda, I believe I'd love you to!"

"You wait, you'll get it, miss! But, Mabs darling," Hildegard went on seriously, "I had no idea you were here. I couldn't have left my only little sister here, year in and year out, without coming to see her—no matter how poor I was, no matter how sad or out of luck! But I quarrelled with Papa years ago—you never knew that? And I left home."

"But, Hilda, what are you doing? Are you married?"

"No, sweetheart."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" She was stroking her sister's hand again, devouring her face hungrily with admiring, adoring eyes.

"Why glad?"

"Because," Mabel confessed, with a childish, honest smile, "you see I've had a dream of you, all these years. I've always thought that I'd love to know all about your beaux, and parties, and what you were going to wear, and who sent you flowers and candy, you know. Hilda, are you a teacher?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't finish that course. *It's a long story, Mabs, and I don't want to bore you with it now——"

"Ah, but no—no—*no*, now, Hilda!" the younger sister protested, clinging to her jealously. "You're not to say that you have no more time and run away! I've just gotten you back."

"It wasn't that, Mabs dear. It was that I *do* mean to tell it to you in pieces, but not all to-day. I had a job in a toy store, and then I worked in the costume room of the Tivoli——"

"Not the theatre!"

"Yes, indeed, the theatre. And then——"

"But, Hilda, did you know actresses?"

"Know them? I used to do little parts myself."

"Oh, Hilda Sessions, you *didn't*!"

"Oh, Mabs Sessions, I did."

"And were you wonderful? For you know you really are beautiful—really and truly beautiful, Hilda," Mabel said seriously.

"No, I don't think I was wonderful. It isn't so wonderful when you are right in it, Mabs."

"I think you're the most beautiful person I ever saw, Hilda," Mabs said, in satisfaction, her untiring gaze still all for her sister.

"Stop it, you little monkey."

"No, but don't they tell you so? Your eyes, you know, with such thick curly lashes, and the way your mouth looks so—so terribly red, and sort of pressed together, and sober—and then you smile so brightly. I'll bet you have thousands of beaus," Mabel exulted.

"Not thousands, exactly." But the look the little sister had described, when the thin, scarlet line of the serious mouth broke suddenly into Hildegard's peculiarly sunny smile, repeated itself, and Hildegard stooped to give Mabs one more quick kiss. "Tell me of yourself, Mabs. What do you propose—what do you hope, to do? How much longer must you stay here?" Hildegard asked.

"Why, I work here," Mabs answered. "That is, I check linen, and sometimes watch patients, even. I have my own room, and I have eight dollars a month, too." She hesitated and sighed. "But I'll never be strong enough to be a real nurse," she said. "And I never go out!"

"Why don't you ever go out?"

"Well, I do, of course, on the roof and the porches. But I mean that I can't manage my cane well in the street, or on the cars, and it's against the hospital regulations, anyway, to have one of the incurables go out in the street."

"No theatre?"

"Oh, no, Hilda, I've never been to the theatre!"

"Nor to the Park?"

"Oh, no, never. Nor shopping," Mabs said, laughing at her sister's stricken face.

"Would they let you go with me?"

"Would they let me! Why, I'm as well as I ever will be," Mabs answered eagerly. "I'm perfectly well, except a little lame, and not terribly husky. Hilda—Hilda, do you mean that some day you'll take me?" she faltered. "I don't mean

any special time. I mean any day—anywhere—just so I'll know that I'm going with my own sister on a party!"

Hildegarde, kneeling beside her, was staring into space. There was a look almost of vision in the violet-ringed eyes, her breath was coming and going evenly, her vital, warm fingers held Mabel's tightly, but she looked like a woman in a dream.

"Mabs, do you remember when I used to tell you fairy tales?"

"Hilda, there never was one I forgot! Often, even now, I'll remember them, they'll come back to me, and poor Mama's awful kitchen, and Cliff and Lloyd and Stewy, and the ashes and dirt and sour milk bottles, and you rocking me—I was almost as big as you were!—and telling me stories."

"Well, then, here's one more," Hildegarde said, in an odd voice, still on her knees, still staring into far space. "I've needed you all this time, Mabs, but I didn't know it. We—we belong to each other, you and I. I was nearly desperate when I came in here to-day—people had been unkind to me, things had gone wrong, everything seemed too hard to bear! But that doesn't matter now.

"This is my fairy tale. It's a fairy tale of two sisters living together in a tiny bit of a house with an e-nor-mous view, up on Russian Hill, just above the water front——"

"Oh, no, no, no, Hilda!" Mabel said, beginning to cry, and putting her sister's hand against her lips.

"A little brown house like a bird's nest," Hilda said, her own mouth trembling, her own eyes brimming. "A big room, with a fireplace, and a bedroom, and a tiny kitchen, with everything you ever saw in it, copper pots and egg-beaters and little striped glass towels, and a coffee-pot. And in the big room, books and flowers and big chairs, and a fluffy cat, maybe——"

Mabel had shut her eyes; big tears were slipping from under her lowered lashes. Hildegarde saw her lips move.

"One sister in this fairy tale works on a newspaper," she went on, "and the other stays at home, and plays with the cat, and reads books, and makes puddings——"

"Oh, Hilda—Hilda—but I can't believe it! But I think I would die of h-h-happiness!" Mabel sobbed.

"Then you shall die of happiness, dear. And now I'm going," Hildegard said, wiping her eyes, clearing her throat, and getting to her feet in a business-like manner. "That's the twelve-o'clock whistle, and it's time for your lunch. And I've not had my breakfast."

"You've not had your *breakfast*! Oh, but Hilda, we'll——"

"No, you won't, dear. I'll get it somewhere near the newspaper office—I'm on a newspaper now. I'll tell you all about that, too, some day soon—to-morrow, maybe. I have to be there before one."

"But where were you going when you happened to think of coming in here this morning? Do you usually go out without any breakfast?"

"Not usually. But this morning I was going—somewhere. I was going out to the beach. Baker's Beach."

"Oh, I know about that!" Mabel said eagerly. "Because the nurses had a picnic there last year, and they told me about it. Hilda, shall we go there some day? It seems to me I could watch the waves for ever and for ever!"

"Yes. We'll go there some day—together," Hildegard promised slowly.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT WAS to this day, and this hour, that Hildegarde looked back long afterward, as to the beginning of the first happiness she had ever known. Kneeling in the barren little hospital room, with her fingers locked about her sister's fingers, tired and heartbroken, hungry and discouraged, nevertheless, she had felt something loosen in her heart then, something melt and yield; and the tears that she had shed had been healing tears, and the beginning of that healing was the beginning of joy.

She had had six years of solitude, without ever speaking to any one of her own blood. Mabel was her own, their origin, their memories were the same; she had dearly loved this little sister years ago, and she found her heart strangely, strongly drawn to her now.

But more than anything else, she had seen, in those first few moments in the hospital, how she was needed. She had seen that, if she had been lonely sometimes, Mabel had been utterly solitary. She had had one revealing glimpse of what her love and companionship might do for this patient, delicate, crippled child of fifteen. And with the relief of a great soul that finds a great work, Hildegarde had flung herself into the new field, determining that if there was a heart that she might make utterly, supremely happy, and that heart Mabel's, at any cost to herself, she must not fail it.

It was part of her reward that she succeeded. But a richness she had not anticipated, that she could not possibly have foreseen, the richness of the discovery of her sister's true nature, was the real joy of the adventure, and made her life different from anything she had ever experienced or imagined.

Mabel had spent her fifteen years between the shanty near

the Dump and the clean, impersonal wards of the hospital for incurable children.

How, in these environments, she had managed to win for herself the soul, the brain, the personality that shone through everything she said and did, Hildegard never ceased to wonder.

There had been books at the hospital, of course, visitors, entertainments, chats with doctors and nurses. Mabel was an insatiable reader, and was in actual correspondence with certain book lovers and book collectors in the city.

That explained some part of it, but not all. Besides this, she was keenly quick and intelligent in conversation, warm and true at heart, appreciative and imaginative, and possessed a delicious quiet sense of humour, quite her own.

Hildegard felt the thrill of a suddenly augmented affection when Mabs first made her laugh, with a quaint little comment upon the activities of the Polish maid who helped them move into their new home.

"She says when her sister is married," Mabel reported, "they'll start in dancing Saturday afternoon, have a feast about eleven, everyone up all night, a big breakfast at nine, Sunday morning, more dancing, then visits to the fathers and mothers of both families, and the grandparents, and then comes the real feast—goose and pâté and everything you ever heard of! And then they'll be married, and congratulated, and everyone'll have a present. I call that a real filling good time, don't you, Hilda?"

And Hildegard, tired after a long office day, and presently to return to the City Room, had laughed almost to tears.

"It's too lovely to have you so funny, Mabs!"

"Hilda, do you think I am?"

"You know you are, Mouse."

And at Hildegard's glance, Mabel might drop her magazine and limp across the room without her cane, and get into her big sister's lap, the wide upholstered chair, one of many thrilling finds in the second-hand shops, quite big enough to accommodate them both. Half hours together they would sit so, watching a dying fire, hearing the spring

winds rustle across the city and click in the eucalyptus leaves above their low roof.

"You weren't lonely to-day, Mabs?"

"Lonely—no! I could sit on the steps and just watch the ferry front and the boats for hours. Some sort of warship went out to-day, Hilda, and they gave her a salute from the Island. I forgot to tell you. No, but I hate to have you go away before lunch. Lunches are such fun!"

"You cooked the asparagus, though?"

"No, I didn't. I wanted it for to-morrow. I heated up things."

"Are you going to come down to Moretti's to-morrow and dine with the gang again?"

"But, Hilda, I'm such a dummy. I never *say* anything!"

"You like it better here?" And Hildegard's eyes would travel about the shabby, wide room that constituted more than half of their domain, the fireplace, the bookshelves she and Mabs were filling so fast, the buttercups in a bowl, the big couch with its pillows, the strip of carpet that was serving in place of the rugs they meant to have some day. A door leading into a small bedroom, a door leading into the kitchen where they always breakfasted and very often dined, a door leading to the porch that hung, like a bird's nest, indeed, high over the ships and piers of the city.

"Hilda, I like this better than heaven! I'd be disappointed to go to heaven from here!"

"Mabs Sessions, you pagan. To compare an eighteen-dollar shack on Russian Hill to heaven!"

"Hilda, do you want me to get up? Do you want another stick on that fire?"

"No, it's warm enough, don't you think so? Stay where you are. Go on, now, you were telling me about this poetess—this Oxford—was she?—poetess——"

"But you're not interested in her, Hilda! No, she was an American, but she lived in England."

"And the little poem about—what was it?—about the 'one inexorable thing'?"

"Oh, yes, don't you love that one!" Mabel would repeat

the deathless lines musically, swiftly, and Hildegarde, perhaps, stay dreaming for a few minutes, while their beauty lingered in the air, and the spring winds played with the sickle-shaped eucalyptus leaves on the roof.

"And she almost never went out, you said, Mabs?"

"Oh, no—that was Emily Dickinson. And she was wonderful, too!"

"I wonder how you get on to all of them? It seems to me nobody ever speaks of a poet or a writer or anything in history that you don't know."

"Well, most persons don't speak of very obscure ones, Hilda. And I had such years and years to read them! In magazines—and in 'The Oxford Book of Verse,' and 'Decisive Battles,' and Disraeli's 'Curiosities of Literature,' and the World Classic Series, and all that. Those are the sort of books everyone sends to a hospital!"

"And Conrad and Stevenson and Ruskin and Browning, too."

"I asked for Browning, because all the other books were always quoting him."

"Who would you ask, for instance?"

"Well, I asked Mrs. Merrill. She used to come in to see us, you know, after directors' meetings, and she would say to me, 'Do me a favour, Mabel, and tell me what you really *want* for Christmas!' She was the most beautiful person I ever saw, I think—not the way you are, Hilda, but the way she used to smile, and her cheeks were so red, and she was always so happy!"

"But what surprises me is that you know what you wanted, Mabs. Flowers, poetry, history—you went after them all so seriously. After all, books aren't expensive, and everyone wants to be kind to invalids. But I don't believe many sick children seize upon life as you did—know what to ask for."

"You always can get what you want," Mabs said more than once. "There are always people to sympathize with you, especially if you want books. You know, Hilda, when you are the great American novelist, we'll travel. We'll go

to places with names—names like Benares and Amalfi and Barbadoes, no matter where they happen to be! And then, after that, I'll have the largest poetry library in America, and every week I'll go out and read poetry to the kids in the Incurable. 'Kids'—I hate that word! To the children, I mean. Oliver Holmes's poem about Bunker Hill, for instance—I know it all. And, Hilda, they never tired of it! I've known children who were *suffering*—who were in pain——”

“Ah, don't, dear! You make me feel so ashamed. You see, you got the best out of all those years, Mabs. I didn't.”

A quick twist of the head that was resting on her shoulder, an upward glance of the wise dark eyes.

“Hilda, as if you always hadn't gotten the best out of everything. Look at you! Look at what you do and how everyone loves you. And you had no chance, really, you had no help.”

“No girl need make quite the mess of it all I did, whatever her chances are or aren't!”

But when she saw the look of distress, of helpless love and longing that this type of remark brought to her sister's eyes, Hildegard would feel ashamed.

“Mabs, if you love me, that's one good thing out of it all, anyway.”

“If I love you!”

“Well, you don't have to cry about it, Mouse.”

Busy weeks—months at the office, too busy to think much of herself, yet always with the warm certainty of presently getting home to Mabs, and the fire, and the Airedale, in the back of heart and head. Hildegard's typewriter clicked, her desk embedded itself deep in drifts of yellow paper. She went out on consignments, snatched a supper bite with Mabel, went back to the noise and heat and confusion of the office to stand smiling and gossiping for a moment with Wat Brown, perhaps to find her favourite gingersnaps waiting in a little pyramid on her desk, perhaps to get a word of commendation from Harvey, her shirt-sleeved neighbour.

"You can write all around Bess Williams!" his muttering voice or his scribbled message might run.

"Want to sign this, Hilda? This is good stuff!" the city editor sometimes said of a club or police-court story. And Hildegarde never tired of the thrill of finding that name in print in the next day's issue.

In the beginning, it had not been easy. In the beginning, there had been days, many of them, when only the thought of the utter shipwreck that must follow for Mabs had kept Hilda from desperate and despairing action.

Mabel had been told something, suspected more. Everyone who knew Hildegarde at this time knew that she had suffered some devastating shock; that with bitter courage and blind instinct she was fighting her way back to sanity and happiness.

And in their various ways, her office associates, the members of the group that dined at Moretti's, united to help her. She was not teased to talk, not coaxed to be gay. Wat Brown let her try articles of other than social interest; let her sign them.

She saw her name, "Hildegarde Sessions," in print, and wondered if Sidney saw it, too. Sidney was married, was bringing home his bride; entertainments for the young Penfields, trips, dinners, dances; she must chronicle them all.

Hildegarde, clicking her typewriter in the hot, smoky office, with the rain streaming down the high windows, and the clocks standing oddly at three, at seven, and twenty minutes past ten, without apparent reference to daylight or meal times, would think of Nancy Paget Penfield, dainty, beautiful, beloved. What was she doing now?

"Hilda!" It would be Wat Brown's voice. "For heaven's sake, rustle me up a picture of this old Wilkinson bird whose daughter is being presented at court! Move, will you?"

Her ready smile, a moment's puzzled blinking, and the characteristic pushing of her rich hair back from her forehead.

"Claudia Wilkinson, is it, Wat?"

"That's the name!"

"Wait a minute. I'll telephone. I know where I can get her picture."

"God bless you!"

Sidney would be forgotten again for the moment, at least. The girl would stretch a little, reach for her telephone. The subject of a glossy proof would put all her old tragedy to flight, and when the city's most fashionable photographer promised his favourite Miss Sessions, who had, indeed, more than once been his subject, the needed photograph, the triumph, small as it was, would be quite enough to send her back to her work content.

And gradually the heartaches ceased, and life grew bearable, grew interesting, grew strangely and newly sweet. Slipping upon her inconspicuous way, between the cabin on the hillside and the newspaper office, sometimes, surprisingly, she carried a heart glowing with content; a smiling, self-possessed girl among the city's thousands of working girls, whose bright hair ringed itself in gold tendrils against the brim of her round hat, and whose deep blue eyes made friends for her wherever she went.

One man after another hoped, feared, suffered at her hands. And it was her strange quality to make friends of them afterward, to have them want to come up to the little cabin on Russian Hill on Sunday afternoons and bang on the rented upright piano whose C in alt would not strike, and amuse Mabel.

"Hildegard, some man must have treated you like a dog," big Tom O'Connor, writhing under a tenth refusal, said huskily one day.

"Not one man, Tommy. Two."

"I don't believe it!"

A smile twitching at the beautiful line of her disciplined mouth, and a reminiscent look in the smiling eyes.

"I found it hard to believe, Tommy, myself."

"And aren't you going to marry, ever, Hildegard?"

"I don't know. I've suffered so!"

They were walking home from the office, at three o'clock

on a rarely quiet and warm July afternoon. The man had never before heard her voice break, as it had broken on the last words, and the little betrayal of weakness gave him a sudden intoxicating hope.

"Hildegard, wouldn't you just try our being engaged? You don't know—you might like it! You and Mabs and I would live in Sausalito, I've got that whole place since Bates went to Chicago."

"You're very cute, Tommy, to include my little sister! But I wouldn't dare try it—even being engaged."

"But, Hildegard, you don't know what it would be like!"

"Oh, yes, I do. I was engaged once, to a fine and rich and honourable man. Only he—forgot it."

"Did he marry?"

"Immediately. He's been married a year now. I met him, one day, not so long ago. I had on my best velvet suit, and an orchid Spike brought me from the Presidential dinner—fortunately!"

"You're very game about it," the man said, with a sidewise glance.

"Not at all." And Hildegard moved on, self-possessed and calm, glancing up now and then at the stars, gloved hands in the loose pockets of her summer coat.

"Didn't Mabs want to kill him?"

"Oh, this was long before Mabs and I were keeping house—years ago. Mabs didn't know anything about it for months. Then, about the time he was married—I told her about him. I wanted to talk about him, perhaps." And Hilda smiled at some deep thought.

"You mean you still cared, then?"

"*Then!* My dear Tommy, the thing aches still—like an old wound, sometimes, only all over me. *Then*, I was walking the floor, I was *dying* of it!"

"Mabs didn't know that?"

"No, Mabs didn't know that."

"You sound," the man commented, with a curious look, "as if it were amusing!"

"Well, wasn't it?" Hildegard asked indifferently.

"And then there was another man, before that?" Tom suggested, after a pause.

"There was another, before that."

"And did you care for him, Hilda?"

"I thought I did, I suppose. I was fifteen. I can hardly remember how I felt now, except that when he went away I was terribly unhappy."

"And now men don't interest you at all. Hilda, I can't imagine that," Tommy said. "Every man who comes into Moretti's or into the office spots you like a shot. 'Who's the young lady?' You ought to see them; I don't believe you'd believe it! *Everyone.*"

"Well, that's an awfully nice thing to hear, Tommy. Of course, one likes the idea of being so universally admired."

"You think it's funny. I can tell from your voice!"

"Funny? I think it's very flattering—very nice. But it doesn't affect me, much. I have my work, and my sister, and my dog, and that's enough. I don't see what I'd gain precisely by adding a strange man to the outfit."

And she smiled at him over her shoulder as she crossed the porch.

Sunday afternoons were great times in the little house on Russian Hill, for sometimes everyone, and always someone, came to tea, and Mabs, in the greatest joy and excitement, poured it.

Hildegard usually joined the tea-drinkers when the festivities were well under way. Until then, she would sit at her desk scribbling, or straightening papers, she would telephone, or go into the kitchen or bedroom on some errand.

But she was actually the heart of the party, and they all knew it. The real party began when her occupations were over and she came to her own low hassock beside Mabel's tea table, and blinked with her bright blue eyes at the group, and added her rich voice to the general discussion.

Beautiful, indifferent, smiling over her cup, sending an occasional amused glance from the face of one speaker to another, how amazingly lovely she was. Slim body, thin

ankles, exquisite hand lazily moving the teaspoon, bright head covered with its cap of royally waved and rippled tawny hair, and face chiselled, keen, clean and pure in every line from the white forehead to the cleft chin, and lighted by lambent sapphire eyes in deeply cut arches, and by the vitality that played like a flame about her mobile mouth.

She liked company to come, because it amused Mabs. They might bring Mabs presents of candy and flowers and goldfish and plants and books; Hildegard would sit at her sister's knee, and dream her own dreams, and look only at Mabel.

And even when the inevitable came, and the rich young man who was a poor reporter, or the poor young man who was a good one, had to put the matter to the test, had to ask the all-important question, Hilda was hardly interested.

"Oh, no, thank you so much. Oh, I'm sorry. But you see—I am not thinking of that sort of thing at all. I'm sorry. And you will come and see us again sometimes—after a while—won't you? Because Mabs likes you so much!"

"Doesn't she make the most delicious sandwiches?" Hildegard would ask eagerly, of her sister's handwork.

"Mabs, I rather liked him because you did, but I don't want to marry him," she would explain, when Mabs, in the flutter of a seventeen-year-old over her sister's admirers, would shyly say a word for this one or that.

And, meanwhile, her work went up, the disappointments fewer, the successes more steady. She was one of the old guard on the newspaper now, she knew what she could do, and they knew what they might expect of her.

Fifty dollars a week, and rival papers deeply interested in the question as to whether she was satisfied with her treatment on the *Sun*. There was a new social editor; Miss Sessions was a special writer now. The little new editor looked at her, awestricken.

"Oh, Miss Sessions, I don't see how you do it so easily! I'm scared to death."

"You mustn't be scared to death. You'll get accustomed

to it in no time. Mr. Brown, am I covering that trial this afternoon? If I am, I want a camera man. You want all there is, don't you? The love letters, and all that?"

"Sob stuff, Hilda. Spit on your hands and give it to 'em!"

She would loiter by his desk, putting papers in her bag, buttoning gloves.

"I'm taking my sister, just for fun. Mab's terribly excited because there's a child in it. She adores children!"

"Have your sister do us an orphanage story for Christmas, why don't you? Good way to start."

"Oh, I want her to be stronger first. I don't want Mabs to work. She's all for her poetry, and her tomato sandwiches, and watching the sunset over the Gate. Plenty of time—she's only seventeen."

"The old man was awfully stuck on your 'Belle the Kleptomaniac' story," the editor might say.

"Sanderson? Is that so?"

"Yep. He says he thinks it'll get the girl a new trial."

"Well, I hope it does. She's done almost everything else, but not that—poor kid. She couldn't murder a kitten, much less a big man."

"Say, did I tell you what I heard about you, Hilda?"

"No, Mr. End-man, you didn't. Here's Spike, too, dying to hear what you heard about me!"

"I heard that the thing that put you off the boys so was that you were married when you were only a kid. How about it?"

A look of amused scorn from her blue eyes.

"How smart people are! Just because I don't happen to want any of these boys at forty a week!"

"Young Rogers has more than that."

"Who told you about that, Wat?"

"The old man. So you were married when you were a kid, Hilda?"

"It was something like that." But she would not be ruffled. She would go her serene way, from the warm cluttered office where the radiators clanked and the lights burned

and burned, into the friendly streets—such familiar streets now. Turk Street, where Pidgy, now married, had lived so long. Geary and Powell, where the St. Francis tea room still presented dim, high windows to the Park. Market Street, where she had applied for her first newspaper job.

Every restaurant and café and shop and fruit stall had associations now. The drugstore where kind Louis de Fontenay had gotten her bromo seltzer and quinine the night that she had such a cold. The Golden Pheasant, with brioches and glazed cakes in the window. And Mabel waiting.

"Hildegarde, I saw another girl in a blue silk dress, and my heart just jumped! I thought it was you."

"But I'm early, darling."

"Oh, I know. But, Hilda, if I were waiting for you some day and you didn't come! Are we going to the trial?"

"We are. And the little girl is to be in court, too. So let's have lunch."

"Hildegarde, do you know how I love you? I was just sitting here trembling, thinking 'She's coming!'"

"How will you feel when it's a man, Mouse?"

"Oh, but it won't ever be! Hildegarde, is it so terrible?"

"Waiting for a man?"

"Loving one."

"I hope you'll know one of these days, Mabs. Although it isn't so nice! Yet—well, I hope you'll know."

"If you hadn't loved that mean boy at first, Hilda—the one you said you told me—told me partly about, then would you have married the rich, rich one, would you have married Mr. Penfield?"

"I think so."

"But what difference did your having liked the first boy make?"

"Oh, it made a great difference, sweetheart. He—Mr. Penfield—was jealous, you see."

"That's your salad, Hilda. The oysters are mine—the tea over there, the milk here. Hilda, did you cry?"

"When we were engaged? No."

"I mean afterward."

"Did I cry? Mabs, nobody ever cried so hard in this world."

"Oh, dearest—with your beautiful eyes! And I never saw it! I could kill him."

The beautiful eyes would wear an odd look, half smiling, half sad.

"No, no, it was partly my fault. I had given him cause to be jealous, darling. But—I don't think he cried."

"Do you hate him now, Hilda?"

"Oh, no. Sitting here, Mabs," Hildegard would confess idly, stirring her tea, "I am at peace with the world. My gloves do smell slightly of benzine, and I still think that woman was no better than a thief to sell you that set of books, but otherwise—I'm liking my life. I'm making good—and now Newhall—you remember the Sunday editor, darling, that said you looked like his little sister?—Newhall wants me to do him some Sunday stories, pure fiction. And if they go, it means fifty dollars apiece!"

"Oh, but Hilda, not with your other fifty?"

"Certainly. One hundred a week. Wouldn't that be fun? I'd take a month's vacation, and we'd go up to Inverness, and you'd swim and row—and we'd picnic, Mabs!"

"Hilda, do you suppose any one else in the world is so happy?"

CHAPTER XXX

LARS, you're quite the most wonderful person I know!" "Don't say that. It makes me laugh to have everybody make such a fuss about the play. A play—what is it! I have yet a better play that they will produce next year. But the books, my two books, they care nothing for them!"

"Make him some coffee, Mabs, that's a darling. These Nordics go perfectly crazy on tea. Throw that away, Lars, she'll mix you some instant coffee, and that'll be better. Pour it into the sand. Go on. Is the play making you mints of money?"

"I don't want money. Yes, I have money from it."

"And you mean to tell me that you sat in a New York theatre and saw them actually play your play? I should have fainted with excitement."

"Only a hundred plays a winter, that's all they produce there!"

"That doesn't make any difference! It's just as glorious. Was it packed?"

"The first night is always packed, because the seats are given away. That isn't what I want to talk to you about!"

"Hilda, I'm going up to the house."

Hildegarde half turned on the sand upon which she was idly lying, smiled at her sister.

"Don't be tactful, Baby. Mr. Carlsen is going to stay at the Inn indefinitely. He'll have plenty of time to talk to me alone. Lars, you haven't anything to say in my private ear, have you?"

"Hilda, aren't you terrible!" Mabs protested.

Hildegarde's laughing look paled a little under the man's

unsmiling glance, she looked down at her own hand, gently pushing grooves in the sand.

"Yes, I have something to say to her," Lars said quite frankly to Mabel.

He had only arrived from the East that day; stopping the train at the little side station, walking the three miles to the brown cabin on the shore of which Hildegard had written him: "Mabs and I are householders! We've bought five rooms and two acres, and shore—outside of Inverness."

He had found it without any trouble, shared their beach luncheon. Now the shadows of the summer afternoon were stealing over the sea, and over the willows and roses and peppers that crept close down to the shore, and over Mabel's beloved garden, where the Airedale was waiting for her.

"You like it?" Hildegard said, rather hastily, when Mabel had gone indoors.

"It's beautiful. It's realer than any theatre in the world. But you evidently don't want to hear what I came three thousand miles to say to you, Hilda."

She faced him bravely. She was perhaps a little sorry it was coming so soon, on his very first night with them. But Lars had asked her to marry him many, many times, and his answer at least would be no surprise to him.

"Lars—I wish you wouldn't——"

"You mean, that you haven't changed?"

"No."

There was a long silence. The man lay on his elbow, staring off to sea. Hildegard had raised herself, and was sitting with her back against an abandoned and upturned rowboat.

"I'm sorry," the man presently said, passing his hand across his eyes, shaking his head, and sighing, "I'm sorry I'm such a fool. But the minute I see you—hear your voice——"

"The minute I saw *you*," Hildegard said affectionately, quietly, filling the space, "I can't tell you what a pleasant sensation I had. Mabs saw you first—she has a kitten that appears to mean more to her than anything else in the world, and she was taking the kitten into the shade on the porch.

She said, as calmly as I do now, 'Why, here's Lars.' Considering she'd never seen you before, I think that was pretty intelligent."

"But how could she——"

"She's seen your picture, my dear, on my desk. Your passport, when you went to Europe. It's good, too."

"You keep it there?"

"I keep it there. And almost every day I look at it and think: 'I wonder how things are going with you, my big brother?'"

He was silent, and Hildegard fell silent, too, in the perfect hour of the summer afternoon. She looked at her caller surreptitiously, finding him enormously improved in the two years since they had last been together.

A magnificent man; beautiful rather than handsome, for the features were heroically big, and the shining yellow sweep of hair conformed to no recognized style. His hands were the lean, nervous hands of the writer, but otherwise he was rather loosely and generously built, well dressed, she thought, for Lars. Had he bought himself clothes in London? He looked individually tailored, somehow.

His face was just the same, unless it was a little lined. The ice-blue eyes wore the same undaunted expression, the skin was burned and tanned almost to leather, the light eyelashes and thick brushes of light eyebrow still gave the old boyish look to his face.

A puzzle to her; well as she knew him. But then he puzzled all the world as well. So unexpectedly simple, so unexpectedly wise; stern and tender at once.

The nephew of "Carl" of Carlsen's Bazaar!

But Lars's father had been a doctor, which indicated some quality unusual, and his mother had sung songs. What sort of songs, or where sung, Hildegard did not know; perhaps she had sung them at weddings and christenings in the old country, perhaps only to her tow-headed little boy.

He was enraptured with the life she and Mabs led at Inverness; she had known he would be. The cabin was made of plain boards, the curtains of Japanese crêpe, the chinaware

was only odd blue bowls and plates. Heliotrope and fuchsias and stock and wallflowers flourished in a tangle in the garden, the picket fence disappeared among them and never returned to sight again, and the sea lipped the path's end down among old willows.

Lars wandered over from the hotel at about ten o'clock every morning, at about the time that Mabel was bargaining with the old fruit seller for figs and tomatoes, and apricots bursting their burned gold skins. The Chinese merchant carried his entire store in two great swinging baskets balanced upon his bent old shoulders.

Far off toward the town women and children would be splashing and shouting in the smooth blue satin waters, but here, across an inlet, all was peace. Shabby, simple, poor—but so utterly at peace.

Mabel, immediately taking Lars into the very inner circle of her friends, "because you've known him longer than any of the others, Hilda, and he's—he's so big that he can afford to act—well, almost stupid," consulted him about her plants, her kitten, and her dog.

"If he would fall in love with *her*, now!" Hildegarde, watching them from the shady window against which she had pushed her work table, would think, with a sigh. He was a wonderful person, Lars. Not yet twenty-seven, yet the world was already calling him that. And she knew—she knew that the world really had only a surface idea of him, really surmised only a tenth, a twentieth part of his strangeness, his greatness.

Mabs was pretty at eighteen. Instead of Hilda's creams and scarlets she had dead-white skin, as white as a marguerite petal, with faint pink staining the cheek-bones under her bright dark eyes. The dark soft hair, trimmed to a cap of curls, framed her birdlike head picturesquely.

And where Hildegarde was, or had been, tragic, questioning, dead in earnest, striving blindly for goodness, struggling on through misplaced love and trust betrayed, Mabs was innocently, gaily confident.

It was easy for her to be good and friendly; it was astonishing to Hildegard to see life become good and friendly in return. There was no passion in Mabs, no ugly, unsuspected deep that might yawn before her some day and drag her down.

No lipping waters, and throbbing moonlight, no swinging lanterns and bewildering summer stars for Mabs. No pulsing of "The Blue Danube," and young eager voice whispering in her ear: "Darling—you know me? You know you can trust me? Why would I want you to do anything wrong?"

Mabs was eighteen. But she still loved Hilda best. And when the boys came up from the city on Saturday nights with cheeses and fruit and cake and perhaps a fish or a ham for the Sunday feast, Mabs liked, even better than she liked their company at first hand, to discuss them with Hildegard afterward.

"It must be great fun to be married, Hilda. I don't mean especially to a person like Alan, although I like him the best, yet. But to anybody, and have all your things new and pretty, with ribbons in them, and a darling little apartment, like those new ones in Lombard Street. And, Hilda, think of the fun of a baby, all your own, nobody able to take it away from you!"

"I suppose all those things would count, Mouse."

"Count!" And Mabel's innocent dark eyes would widen amazedly. "But isn't that—isn't that *it*?"

"Isn't that—what?"

"Well—getting married?"

Hildegard might smile. But with eyes fixed dreamily, a little sadly, on far distance.

"It might be a happy way of managing, Mabs, if one could!"

"But why couldn't one? Why couldn't one just go on having books, and suppers, and fires together—you don't *have* to have thrills and crying and lovers' quarrels and all that, do you?"

"I don't suppose you do, sweetheart. I would even suppose that you would be happier without—without the tiger

part. But—but it doesn't seem a matter of choice, does it?"

"The difference is that I'm an utter nonentity," Mabs concluded, with satisfaction, "and you are a genius!"

"Well, that's a very polite answer, at least."

"But, Hildegarde," Mabs asked shyly one night, when, after the five week-days in the city, they had come back to the cabin and the shore they loved, "you saw Lars every day while we were in town, didn't you? And we'll see him all day to-morrow and Sunday, won't we? Doesn't that mean that you do like him better than any of the others?"

"Oh—that! But of course I do!" Hildegarde conceded carelessly. "I make no secret of *that*, Mabs. He's head and shoulders above the rest of them. Last night, at Sanguinetti's, I told him that, even when he was silent, he was saying more than any one else. He's magnificent. And then, he's the oldest friend I've got in the whole group; we know each other like sister and brother. Just now, when things are changing so fast—when it looks as if I might get a start with these little stories of mine—and you and I might have to go to New York, where everything would be strange—just now, I say, a friend like Lars, steady as a big Danish rock in the North Sea, is priceless!"

And she leaned back in her basket chair, indifferent, smiling, sending a glance toward Mabs through half-lowered, heavily fringed lids, and looking back at the sea again.

"Mabs, is this heaven or earth? You and I, down here in the garden with Happy——"

Her long, clever hand pulled the Airedale's ears, and the dog poured through his nose the wistful essence of a whine that was response.

"No, but, Hilda, that's all very well—but why don't you love him—I mean, in the—the important way?"

"Because there's a frightful difference, darling. One might think a man was everything—as indeed I do think him!—good, famous—yes, and attractive, lovable, too. But until the real thing started, Mabs, it'd be no use!"

Mabs tickled her kitten's ears, frowned at the sea.

"How do you mean 'until the real thing started,' Hilda?"

"The quivering, trembling, helpless part of it," Hilda offered hesitatingly.

"Oh, but, Hilda, one wouldn't have to have that! I should think you'd hate that!"

"Well, you do. But it's a very real thing, Mabs—it's not just imagination. To spend one's whole days in a sort of shimmery dream about one man, and one's nights quite wakeful—quite contented to lie awake!—remembering him, what he said and how he said it. To have a box of violets arrive, and your heart come straight up into your throat, and your eyes blur, and your hand shake as you try to find the card. To know his handwriting—the first time you see it!—and to go to the telephone and call just that one magic number, that little combination of words that means in a few minutes you'll hear a voice saying 'Hilda—this is Sid——'"

Mabel was silent, awed by the accents of the half-pitying, half-amused voice.

"If you've once had that, Mabs, you have to wait for it! You can't take less."

Another long silence. Then Mabel, glancing toward the pattern of light and shade that mottled the deep chair in which Hildegard sat, said timidly:

"Hildegard, do you love Sidney Penfield still?"

"I suppose so."

"But Lars is such a darling!"

"Lars is worth twenty of him, a thousand of him," Hildegard conceded, with a flash of laughter. "But——"

"Hilda, isn't it funny that homely girls—and dull girls—are always getting happily married, as complacent as a lot of pussy cats! But you—who are so lovely, and so clever, and so beautiful——"

"Go on. I like it!"

"No, but I'm not fooling! But isn't it funny that it should be you who had two—two!—horrid experiences."

"And got cured, don't forget that! Got vaccinated, so that I could go straight ahead with my work—with my own self-expression, independent of them! I'm like a person

twice widowed. I can forget love affairs for a little while. And I'm grateful.

"Why, Mabs," the older sister added idly, after another pause, "you don't know how free—how light it makes me feel to go my own way, not thinking about men. I love the office, I love my own work, and the wonderful way they feel about me, the way they treat me there. When young Rogers, the managing editor's son, when he"—Hildegard paused, and the deep smile Mabel knew so well glinted in her eyes for a second—"when he liked me," she began again, "it was—wonderful!—to feel so—cool. His mother used to say to me, over and over: 'It's remarkable to have such a pretty gell, and such a young gell, so dignified, Miss Sessions! Mr. Brown tells my husband that you have raised the atmosphere of the whole office!' And I have men to thank for that," Hildegard concluded, with a little wry smile. "I have the two men who burned that sort of nonsense out of me, stamped on it, crushed it, once and for all!

"And I love success, Mabs. I suppose I love money, if the truth must be spoken. But it's partly because of the fun it means to you and me—the cat and the dog, and our little house here. And my dresses—I love to be able to wear these affected plain frocks and the broad hats—and they cost money!

"My dear, I'm happy. Utterly, absolutely happy. It was hard at first. But I had to keep the crying, the walking the floor——"

She stopped for a long space.

"I had to keep that from you, and after a while it was better," she resumed. "And now—I'm happy."

"'Methinks the lady doth protest too much,'" Mabs said, after a pause.

"Methinks," agreed Hildegard, and Mabs saw the glimmer of tears on her cheek in the mellow summer moonlight, "she does!"

CHAPTER XXXI

HE WAS standing in the enormous great columned doorway of the new *Sun* building, a tall man in a light overcoat. Hilda's half glance, as quick as the sudden movement of her heart, went to his face.

The colour came into her own, and her eyes brightened.

"Sidney Penfield! I might easily have walked by you."

"Oh, no danger. I've been standing here for twenty minutes waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? Did you send me any message?"

She was the more self-possessed of the two. The man was oddly shaken, smiling, there was a dubious, questioning look in the fine gray eyes she remembered so well.

"You know our offices are in this same building. I've seen you several times, Hilda," he said eagerly, with a certain shyness and boyish friendliness that she found new, and infinitely becoming, and, in their subtle suggestion of her changed status, flattering, too. "I see your name on articles now and then. It makes me—proud!"

Her heart gave an unexpected twist. But her expression remained characteristic; it was only a self-possessed interested smile that lighted the deep-lashed blue eyes. She did not flush and pale now as once she had done under the magic of his voice.

"Oh, thank you!" she said simply.

"I didn't know whether you would want to speak to me or not," Sidney said, a little confused.

"I always like to speak to you," Hildegard answered composedly.

"Would—would you come and have tea with me to-day—or any day, Hildegard? There's something—something I have to explain to you, you know."

"Why, gladly. Not for explanations," Hildegard said, with a smile, "but—for tea!"

"To-day?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," Hilda answered, with her charming childish air of sudden interest, "I *am* going to have tea, somewhere, in about fifteen minutes. I have to go upstairs and report, and leave my Sunday story, and then I thought I'd slip in somewhere, and have something to eat——"

"Slip into the Palace, right next door here, and let me slip in first and do the ordering?"

"Oh, but I warn you, Sidney, it'll be a meal. I'm starving, I've had no lunch."

"Well, you can have beef with Yorkshire pudding if you like, I don't care."

"And another thing, my little sister Mabel is waiting for me upstairs in the office, and I'll have her with me."

"I didn't know you had a little sister Mabel!"

"Well, I have. We've been housekeeping for four years now; she's a delicious person. And of course, she's been wanting to meet *you*."

"I'm flattered," Sidney said, with a deep bow and a sudden embarrassed flush.

"Not at all. I've talked to her about all my old—beaus," Hildegard flashed him a full, level look, composedly significant.

"Then do bring her."

"I will." Hildegard went upstairs, an odd fluttery panic in her heart. That was the way one met the man one had loved, after years? That was the sort of talk in which one indulged?

"Mabs, I've got a disappointment and a surprise for you. We're going to have company for tea."

"Oh, dear!" Mabs made a disappointed grimace. She was in a chair beside Hilda's under Hilda's green drop light, talking with one or two cubs.

"Mr. Sidney Penfield," Hildegard added, not glancing at her sister, busy with letters and manuscripts, yet with the

little smile Mabs recognized as unmistakably a danger signal tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Hilda, not really?" the younger sister said, awed.

"Really. So powder your little nose and come down, and you'll have a chance to see the man I've been talking about for four years."

She was straightening the white collar of the plain little velvet gown that was one of her affectations; a broadbrimmed velvet hat, with a great dahlia on it, was pressed down close above the beautiful eyes. The tawny gold hair curved in little tendrils and waves against the hat brim and about her ears. Mabs thought that she had never seen Hildegard look more lovely or more dangerous.

They found Sidney waiting at an inconspicuous table; he rose when they approached, and at first quite pointedly directed his courtesies, his concern, toward Mabel. Mabel's bunch of violets, the replica of the familiar fragrant bunch that awaited Hildegard, was at her place.

That was Sidney, Hildegard thought, settling into her place, answering only with a slow glance, a slow, smiling up-lifting of her blue eyes, his happy, almost agitatedly happy question: "Orange pekoe, Hildegard, and cinnamon toast?"

"But Mabs likes jam and muffins."

"Toasted muffins. And some of the Tiptree Scarlet, if you have it."

"Doesn't that sound delightful, Mabs? We don't know the Tiptree Scarlet, do we?"

But the very admission showed him how she had developed. It was the tacit acknowledgment of a self-possessed and cultured woman that she did know other things—that an English jam, after all, was not so important a thing to know. Sidney watched in sudden almost painful fascination, as she leaned forward, to fasten, with strong firm fingers, the second bunch of violets to Mabel's plain silk frock.

Beautiful hands, clever and slender, and made more beautiful by the fine, transparent organdy cuff and the big jade ring. She was paying him no attention at all.

"Hildegarde, how long is it since we have had tea together?"

"This is January. It'll be five years next week."

There was something splendid about her honesty; about her admission that she could estimate the time so closely. It was as if she challenged him, as if she said, "I cared—that much, you see. I remember the actual date and year. But make me care one hundredth part that much now!"

"And how is Mrs. Penfield?"

"Very well, I believe. She's in Paris, you know." He sighed, not quite without premeditation. Mabel was absorbed in the sight of a strongly pulling Chow on a leash in the corridor. "We—don't correspond, Hilda. There's been a good deal of trouble," he said briefly. "You knew that?"

The girl's face was genuinely concerned.

"I knew—I had heard something—rumours, of course."

"Well——" He shrugged.

"I'm sorry!" Hildegarde said thoughtfully, pouring tea.

The smile with which he answered her smile was weary; now that she could study him at her leisure, he seemed older, jaded somehow, oddly patient and gentle.

"I'm sorry, too!" he answered indifferently.

"Hilda, that was the real cocoa colour—I'll bet that dog was worth a thousand dollars!" Mabs said enthusiastically.

"Does this little sister of yours like dogs?"

"She has a mongrel Airedale——"

"Hildegarde! He's absolutely thoroughbred, but he hasn't show points!"

Hildegarde was smiling at her fondly, attentively.

"You see!" she said, glancing at Sidney with a shrug.

"I could get you a Chow from the Van Arden Kennels," Sidney offered.

"Oh, no, thank you! Happy's heart would be broken. He's jealous as it is," Mabel responded, glowing.

"And where do you live now, Hilda?"

"We have a little apartment in Taylor Street. We don't like it as much as the old place—you never saw that?—on Russian Hill, but it has some view, and a roof for Happy.

It's handier, and easier to sublet for the summer—when we go up the bay."

"Tahoe? We have a place there."

"No, not so grand. Tomales Bay, which we adore. And this fall," Hildegard went on, "we're going to New York. They're transferring me to the New York paper for three months, and of course, my big baby here goes along!"

"We're to have a compartment on the train!" Mabel exulted, laughing at her own childishness. "And Hildegard's to do her kind of Sunday story every day. It's to be called 'His Wife from California,' isn't it, Hilda?"

"That is supposed to thrill Mr. Penfield, is it, Mabs?"

"She knows it does!" Sidney said, with a serious look. "You've certainly made good, haven't you, Hilda?" he asked admiringly.

"Only as much as hundreds and thousands of other persons have," she admitted. "It always thrills me to think how many are making good all the time," Hildegard went on idly, "getting their raises, getting their promotions, feeling themselves successful! Mabs and I think our five thousand a year is the biggest income in the world, yet I suppose everyone in our apartment house—and in every other!—thinks the same."

"Oh, come, it's a little more than that," Sidney protested, trying to stir her, to make her flush, to penetrate that shell of easy pleasantness that seemed to make tea and cinnamon toast the real interest of the hour.

"Not much. There'll be three hundred persons on the train with us," Hildegard said, smiling, "and three hundred the day before, and the day after, and every one of them will think himself the really important person in the crowd!"

Sidney, still trying to reach her, to touch her; in some way to make her feel again, in the old fashion, the thrill she once had felt in the friendship of a Penfield, presently took them home in a taxi. "Tell him to stop at the Broadway side," Hildegard said casually, jumping in.

"The newspaper doesn't give you a car, Hilda?"

"No, except on special occasions. When we went down

to Del Monte to do the President's visit, we had a car, didn't we, Mabs? My little sister talked to the Chief Executive as sassy as a magpie."

"I drive Mr. Carlsen's car up at the Bay," Mabs added.

She preceded them into the apartment house, Sidney delaying Hilda a moment in the hallway.

"Hildegarde—let me speak to you a moment——"

"But aren't you coming up?"

"I can't to-day." He *would* interest her. "I only wanted you to know something—I couldn't very well speak of it before your sister——"

"Don't you think she's cute, Sidney?" Hildegarde's face lighted with pleasure.

"She's charming."

"Ah, but you don't know her, really. How delicious she is, fussing about the house, planning things—she's the smartest thing I ever knew."

"She seems adorable. What I wanted to say to you," Sidney said somewhat briefly, "was that Nancy is in Paris for a divorce."

"Nancy?"

"My wife."

"Oh, I see! Oh," Hildegarde said, with thoughtful eyes narrowing on space. "I see. Well, I think that was pretty generally expected, Sid, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so. But my mother takes it very hard."

"She would," Hildegarde conceded simply. "A break—in the sacred ranks of the Family!" she added lightly.

"That's all it means to you, is it, Hilda?"

They were standing in the rather dimly lighted foyer, Hildegarde looking down at the bunch of violets she held in her hand. Now she glanced quickly up, glanced down again.

"What should it mean to me, Sid?" she asked with an air of surprise.

He knew himself gaining ground now; his eyes were fixed steadily upon her.

"Something—just a little more personal than that, perhaps," he said.

"I've had to forget that," Hildegarde reminded him. And after a pause she added musingly, "For exactly five years, less one week!"

The blue eyes, from under the films and tendrils of gold that had blown against the brim of her velvet hat, met his challengingly, with a sort of deep, scornful amusement.

"You mean to tell me," Sidney said, trembling a little in spite of himself, with a rush of wild, irrational happiness into his heart, "you mean to tell me that forty men haven't loved you in that time?"

She looked at him in surprise, looked at the violets again, and smiled oddly, significantly.

"No, I don't mean to tell you anything of the kind!" she said simply. And suddenly her fingers were for a second in his, she nodded carelessly, and with her "Good-bye, Sidney. Do this again soon!" began slowly to mount the stairs.

Sidney walked rapidly down the hill, saying to himself all the things that he wished now it had occurred to him to say to her. Oddly, uncomfortably, she had somehow made him feel himself worsted.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE thing fell like a dark shadow upon them all. Upon Hildegarde's associates in the newspaper office, the city editor, the fellow reporters who loved her, each in his separate way, and who had always felt her, somewhat proudly, above this sort of commonplace joy and pain.

The group at Moretti's felt it keenly; the painters and writers and poets of the city, whose chum and companion and confidante she had been for happy years, who thought her the most beautiful, and unattainable, and wonderful of women, lamented it in resentful groups.

Hildegarde Sessions was in love.

Lars Carlsen, long recognized as the most significant and important member of both groups, was watched in sympathetic silence. He had made no secret of his feeling for her for many years. He was the sort of man, blond, big, quiet, indifferent to public opinion, who usually got what he wanted.

But he was not going to get what he wanted now. Hilda was in love with an enormously rich man, and was as silly, as excited, as helpless as a schoolgirl about it. And Lars could only look on, as helpless as the rest.

Upon Mabel, of course, the blow fell with the greatest force. And perhaps what hurt all of them who loved Hildegarde most was that, apparently, she did not see the change, she did not know of the pain she caused her sister.

No trips in Sidney Penfield's big car, no violets, no box seats for the theatre, brought back to Mabel's eyes the light that had shone there for more than four idyllic years.

"She's jealous, the darling!" Hildegarde told Sidney lovingly.

"She oughtn't to be," the man said, with that air of cour-

teous concern that became him so well. "She gains a brother—that's all. She can have all the books, all the flowers, all the travel she likes now. We mean to spoil our little sister, don't we, Hilda?"

"Sidney, you're being wonderfully sweet to me!"

"I want to be," he would say simply, quietly.

He was, in consideration, in gravity, in understanding, a different man, in these days. And yet he was also in many ways exactly the Sidney of years ago.

The grooming, the big tweed coats, and the delicate scent of soaps and talcum were the same. The fine hand, opening his purse, dispensing gold pieces, was the same, the quick authoritative manner, the amazing social ease.

But in other things he was older. He sometimes showed a little edge, a little hardness, that vaguely disturbed Hildegard. Women, to the Sidney of thirty, were not what women had seemed to be six years ago. Hildegard must console him for disillusion now, must persuade him that there were indeed left in the world women who could love a man for his own sake, who could naturally love home, honour, children.

His wife had proved to be a soulless little butterfly, disdaining domesticity, denied the motherhood that might have sobered her and have given her a clearer sense of her position as a Penfield. Sidney's one brother, married to her sister, had never had a second child; a son to bear the family name would have given the deepest satisfaction to them all. But Nancy never had borne a child.

And only a few months after marriage, restlessness had seized upon her. She had skimmed the cream of life in a few years, yachting trips, theatricals, Paris, a portrait painter for a lover, jewels, perfumes, frocks, even acting in the movies. And these had left her profoundly dissatisfied, scornful of the other women of her set, always looking hungrily beyond the men toward that ideal lover for whom all her dressing and grooming, the bobbing and bronzing of her hair, her polishing of nails and plucking of eyebrows, was half unconsciously directed.

"She got to be—awful!" Sidney admitted to Hildegarde, with a shudder. "I couldn't seem to get at her. She would sit up in bed, reddening her lips, scowling, giving me the most resentful looks a man ever got, tired out, sick from eating and drinking and dancing too much the night before, and I'd feel—I'd know that she wasn't even taking in what I was saying."

Hildegarde, beautiful and triumphant and excited, would smile her cryptic smile. Only a few years, and where were the invincible Pagets of Boston now?

Sidney had long before this explained the breaking of his pledge to Hildegarde; explained it in terms that had been perfectly satisfactory to her, whatever they might have been to a woman not carried away by the storm of an old love renewed.

"Nancy got me—all in a heap, if you know what I mean, Hilda. I'll not deny that!" It was a question of a dance and a house party.

"I like you for not denying it, Sid."

"Well, of course, it was a family frame-up, but I wasn't smart enough to see that. I mean, the minute they saw it coming, they jumped right in, and played Nancy's game for all it was worth. Everyone delighted, presents, telegrams, newspapers—all that sort of thing.

"And then, my dear," Sidney had said, with that deferential, finished manner of his that had always held such charm for her, "then came the time when I ought to write to you. And I couldn't do it.—Here's our asparagus.—No, I couldn't do it. It's a little too easy, Hilda, the excusing letter—'always care for you and hope some day a much better man'—that sort of thing! I was doing a rotten thing, and I knew it, and I wanted to have you think me exactly as rotten as I really was. I didn't want forgiveness—I didn't want to think easily of myself—I knew that it was——"

He had hesitated, glancing keenly at her downcast, thoughtful face.

"I knew that it was going to hurt you horribly," he said.

The fascination of him, the man-of-the-world air of mas-

tery, of being, no matter what mistakes he made, first and last and always a gentleman, a Penfield, a person of ideals and imagination, captivated her to-day as it had captivated her years ago.

"And now let's not talk about that any more. You've forgiven me, and that's all that matters."

"I'm not quite sure I've forgiven your mother, Sid."

"Ah, well, that's different. You're not going to marry my mother."

"I suppose your mother talked about me rather freely years ago?"

"I don't know. What does it matter? She might have, to one or two old friends, one or two of my aunts, perhaps, as an explanation for the sudden conclusion of our affair."

"But now," Sidney had said, "she's inclined to be awfully decent. She read aloud your story in the *Sun* last Sunday—to quite a bunch of people, the usual Sunday gang. Read it beautifully, and at the end she said: 'Bless her heart, the child can write!'"

"Kind," Hildegard said drily. And in her heart she thought: "I'll even *that* score some day!"

"You know, Hilda, that would make a great difference with my mother," Sidney said.

"What would?"

"Your success as a writer."

"You mean—let me see if I understand you? You mean that all the past would be forgiven if I really became famous? It doesn't seem possible!"

"Are you trying to be saucy with me, you baggage? Do you want me to get right up and kiss you?"

Her delicious rich laugh would punctuate the next phrase.

"Well, doesn't it sound a little like that?"

"It may sound so, but you know my mother, and you know it isn't really that. She loves to be proud of her family, and she's all ready to be proud of you!"

Hildegard presently saw his mother again, an occasion upon which Mrs. Penfield was her nicest self. She looked older and seemed gentler. She took both Hildegard's

hands, and looked up, with a sort of deliberate and resolute sweetness, into the beautiful face, and said simply:

"My dear, it's delightful to see you again! It's been too long."

"Cool!" Hildegarde thought, remembering the causes of the break, and the part this woman had played to make it permanent. But aloud she only said: "It's nice to see *you*, Mrs. Penfield. How is the wonderful Mary Sidney?"

"Oh, she's quite too perfect, except that Peggy keeps her in Paris almost all the time for her accent, and I don't think the child is very happy," the grandmother said. And immediately it was as if she and Hildegarde had parted only a few days ago, and as if everything had always been serene between them.

The beautiful country-house luncheon, with its melons and rolls and salad dressing and sweets, was served in the remembered way; the cousins came in, there was talk of golf and bridge and cocktails; the clocks might have stood still for all these years.

In the afternoon, it appeared that Sidney and Hildegarde were to call upon Aunt Alice, the magnificent old wreck that was formally known to society as Mrs. Peter Craigie, the family dictator. Aunt Alice lived near Piedmont, some twelve miles away; Sidney drove Hildegarde there in his roadster.

She sat deep in the fat soft leather upholstery, the big engine hummed, the big wheels revolved easily; Hildegarde was smothered in a bearskin robe, a bearskin cap, the March day was bitter cold, and there was ice on the pools that had formed in wheel tracks.

They passed Bay Lane, and Hildegarde could see the cold waters of the lower bay, ruffling in wind. A stately train, puffing steam, moved along the shining tracks.

She would ride in these trains now, in drawing rooms and special cars! She would be one of the richly dressed, bored women who looked out of the big windows.

But she did not call Sidney's attention to her old neighbourhood. Everything was changed, anyhow. Apartments,

houses, and factories covered the old site of the Dump; there was even a development, "Castilian Acres," consisting of small cement houses with Spanish tiled roofs, patios, and grilled windows. The old Sessions house still stood forlornly at its old crazy slant, discoloured, dirty, and dilapidated, but angled across the weed-choked yard an enormous sign was planted: "This Desirable Property for Sale at Auction." The next time chance brought Hildegard Sessions down this strip of highway it would be gone.

Gone. Everything but the memory of those days. Gone the warm, dirty, smelly kitchen, the grimed tables and chairs, the grease-stained floor, the dingy, fire-blackened pots and pans, the whining voices and damp rags, Nelly Sessions, rocking, idle and complaining, Rudy Sessions coming home drunk on Saturday nights and fumbling for the door-knob. Frost-burned little red hands, little faces chapped and sore from perennial colds, dirty bundled clothing, smeared and sour food—all gone!

Hildegard was thoughtful after they had passed it. The ten years that lay between her and this old life had been long to live. But they telescoped to-day into a brief enough time, after all. Fifteen when she had run away from it all; twenty-five now. Still young, but she felt as if she had lived for ever.

"I didn't hear you, Sid."

She roused herself suddenly from deep thought to smile at him.

"I was just saying, my dear—not important. But remember to handle my Aunt Alice with gloves. She can't bear professions for women, terrible old reactionary—don't get her started on woman suffrage, or prohibition, or anything like that!"

"I'll remember," Hildegard promised as he turned the car in at old gates that were covered with fifty-year-old ivy, and stopped before a brick mansion made formidable by narrow high windows all curtained alike, by chimneys, porticoes, balconies, and gables, all in speckless order and quite devoid of any evidences of human occupation.

Inside, Hildegard found exactly what she expected to find: carpets rather than rugs, elderly maids, dim oil paintings, rep hangings, walnut chairs with horsehair backs, antimacassars, cabinets of curios, rubber plants groomed to the last thick shining leaf.

Through all the narrow, brilliant clear window panes she caught dismal glimpses of the garden; of evergreens and cypress, of brick-edged paths green with fine mould. In all the polished steel-rodged grates coal fires winked sleepily, decorously. There was an odour of musk in the air.

Aunt Alice, eighty, and a widowed daughter and a bachelor son, both in their sixties, were the company. Quiet persons, pleasant of voice, cordial, intelligent. Horace asked Hildegard if she had read the late Ambassador's "Life and Letters." Louise spoke with a sad sort of animation of her dear little dog, Coaxie, who had "been quite too frightfully upset."

Mother, son, and daughter had heavy, oily black hair threaded with shining silver, pale, long, aristocratic faces, and lean long hands. A complacency, as essential and as present as their breath, marked all three.

During the quiet, dull conversation of the tea hour, Hildegard found herself wondering why she had not met these important members of the Penfield clan before. Then she remembered that Aunt Alice had refused to meet Sidney's sweetheart five years ago; she remembered his half-vexed and half-amused admission that his father's aunt would have nothing to do with his engagement, would not recognize it on any terms.

But she had conquered even the old lady, the girl reflected. To-day there was every evidence that Aunt Alice was trying to unbend, and that, in a stiff and awkward way, Louise, who reflected all her mother's moods, was actually friendly.

"I shall have to call you—h'm—Hildegard, my—h'm—dear," Louise said, in a nervous girlish rush, "because we shall be—h'm—relatives now."

There was controlled laughter, for this was to be strangely humorous for Louise. Louise never spoke without the con-

stant interruption of shutting her mouth and making a little breathing sound through her nose. Both she and her brother were still children, in their mother's presence.

Aunt Alice's was the strongest personality of the three, even now. At eighty, she was keen-eyed, magnificent, proud. She talked to Hildegard about the Penfield and Craigie families, and Hildegard, who had been prepared for this by Sidney, listened sympathetically.

"... uncle, Gen'l Craigie—Wash'n's aid—handsomest feller that ever stepped out in uniform," said Aunt Alice, mumbling soft bread and raining crumbs upon a richly silken, enormous, soft, vague bosom. Real laces, scarfs, old pins and rings, a lapped cap, and a fringed shawl enveloped Aunt Alice as in a shapeless but imposing bag. "Lafayette—grandfather's friend—no family, but lovely, lovely man—Sidney's great grandmother—home one of the famous places of the South—entertained fifty—sixty guests—horses—dancin'——"

"Aren't they wonderful?" Sidney said, with a laugh, when he had tucked Hildegard beside him for the drive home.

"Wonderful? Sidney, I think they're terrible!" the girl protested, with an answering laugh.

He gave her a quick, surprised glance.

"But, my dear, that's just the way they *are*. They've been that way ever since I can remember. And, of course, it matters—tremendously!—to the rest of the family that they've accepted you—that we've got Aunt Alice on our side. She's the dictator, after all. And Mother'll be perfectly delighted that she likes you—that she talked to you the way she did, about the family, and all. She said to Mother the other day, 'She sounds charming. She'll give him sons. I like her independence.' So, you see, we've nothing to fear *there*. And Mother began to sort of feel her way with me about your writing. Asked if you wouldn't give it up entirely. Aunt Alice thinks you should. I said, no, not quite that—said that, of course, you'd give up the newspaper end of it."

The big furry shoulder against which her own shoulder

rested lurched on a curve, the big furry gloves moved lightly on the wheel; Sidney's smile met hers over his rolled collar.

"Mother's terror is that you'll write something some day that will get everyone talking—get people imagining that you've put them into a book. You see, you're ten times too smart for all of them!" the man assured her. "But I told my mother," he went on, "that I'd laid out a programme for you that wouldn't leave much time for your writing—more's the pity. Of course, we'll have to go abroad, Hilda?"

"Of course!"

"If we're married in the late morning, quietly, then we can go down to Del Monte—that makes you blush. Will you be scared to death to find yourself a married woman off for Del Monte? Well, and then we'll leave a day or two later for New York. You'll have the regular *maisonette* there——"

"*Maisonette*?"

"You don't know what that is? It's a little apartment in a big hotel. A drawing room, with an open fireplace, a little dining room, a bedroom, everything complete, with all the privacy of a cottage in Sussex and all the excitement of being right over the most crowded streets in the world.

"And we'll shop on the Avenue, Hildegarde. I know just where I'm going to take you for a big coat, either golden-brown seal or sables, whichever knocks our eyes out. And hats—you're to have a trunkful of hats. And a bracelet——"

"I'd much rather," Hildegarde decided, "have pearls than a bracelet."

"My father'll give you pearls—he gave Peggy hers. It's a family custom—it's a *spécialité de la maison*. And then, my dear, luggage all strapped and ready, car waiting—the Sidney Penfields off for Europe! And we'll stay five or six months—take our time. We'll get back here in December, before Christmas, and there'll be a string of parties and dinners, and next summer we'll build—we'll build a perfectly stunning place.

"And by that time——" He hesitated, grinning.

Her hand, in its warm glove, stole toward his big one, on

the wheel, her blue eyes shone in a suddenly flushed, adorably confused face.

"By that time——" she stammered.

They were in the grounds of "Broadhall," now; he had stopped the car at the side door, and could turn to her and cover both her hands with his; Hildegarde, wrapped in the heavy furs, laughed, with her cold, fresh cheek almost touching the brown, cold cheek so near her.

"I trust I know my duty to the great house of Penfield, Mr. Sidney, sir!"

"I trust you know you're the most beautiful thing God ever put on the earth!"

"I trust that when you get this houseful of little boys, you'll not be jealous because their mother pays no more attention to you!"

"No, but, seriously, Hildegarde dearest. This is March. We've seen each other every day now for five weeks—isn't that enough? When are you going to give me the most beautiful wife any man in the world ever had?"

"Shall we say—in October?"

"October! No, we won't say in October, or ten years from October, either. We've loved each other for five years, let's not wait any longer!"

"When—when is your divorce final?"

"Immediately. Next week. So we don't have to bother about *that*."

"It isn't only that. There's only one thing—really," Hildegarde confessed musingly.

"And that's your job? Just forget it. They'd have fired you quickly enough any moment they wanted to."

"No. It's—Mabel."

A cloud came over the man's brightly eager face.

"I know. I know exactly how you feel! And it does mean an empty summer for her. But afterward, when we get home, we'll make it up to her. Won't we bring her the wonderful boxful of loot from Paris!"

"Those things don't matter a lot to Mabs. You see, we've been buying this place at the Bay, and she simply

adores it. She loves our breakfasts out in the garden, and the flowers, and the dog—in a word,” Hildegard confessed, with a troubled smile, “she loves *me*.”

“Well, that’s all right. She’s got to share you with me, that’s all. She knew you’d marry some day.”

“Yes, but she might have imagined that I’d marry someone a little nearer. Not a Penfield!”

“My dear, she’s going to have such a good time, she’s going to be so spoiled from now on, that she’ll come to see that the luckiest thing that ever happened to her was your marriage! Leave it to me. We’ll let her fool along at the Bay until she comes to the conclusion herself that she belongs with us, and then she’ll have a beautiful apartment of her own in the new house, and a car, and all the garden she wants. And meanwhile, about this summer. There isn’t some woman friend who would go up there and keep her company?”

“I don’t know of one. There aren’t any very close neighbours. Lars Carlsen—you know?—has bought a rambling sort of point next door, but he couldn’t exactly——”

“But that’s an excellent idea! Mightn’t he fall in love with her?”

“Lars? He might, some day. They’re extremely fond of each other. But just at present——”

“He’s in love with another woman, eh?”

“Something like that.”

“And I can imagine who she is! But about Mabel, you positively mustn’t let a thing like that spoil your life, Hilda. We must take the plunge and trust to time to adjust everything. Now, listen. Your vacation begins just after Easter, doesn’t it? Well, we’ll slip into the City Hall on the fourth or fifth and get our license. Don’t say one word to Mabel. A day or two later, I’ll come up to the Bay, we’ll talk it all over, and then you and she and I will drive down to town, meet a few members of the family, and slip into church, and do the deed. Mother thinks that, in view of the divorce, so very recently, it would be wiser to do it without any fuss, and let everyone get accustomed to the idea when we are

safely out of the way. That's—that's in four weeks, Hilda. How does it sound?"

"Scary!"

"But you'll do it, dearest? Please, *please*, let me be the judge of what's wise, just this once. You're excited, and confused, thinking of the newspaper, and Mabel, and a hundred other things that have nothing to do with it. Just take the jump, tell her that day, and the newspaper afterward, and see how beautifully everything works out!"

She looked at him earnestly, trustingly.

"I think perhaps you're right, Sidney."

"I *know* I'm right!"

He glanced about the garden, and toward the shining windows that flanked the side door, leaned forward suddenly and kissed her.

"Come in and say good-bye to Mother, and I'll drive you up to town, you glorious thing. And in four weeks make up your mind that this place is going to be as much your home as mine!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

ALL very well, but she couldn't tell Mabel. She couldn't tell Mabel. Not in so many words. What Mabel suspected was, of course, a different affair.

Mabel saw her excited and feverish, saw the odd change in her, and perhaps drew her own conclusions. Hildegarde fancied that she even cried about it sometimes. But a constrained silence kept them mute on the great topic of Sidney Penfield, and even on topics apparently quite unrelated, Hildegarde found that she could not speak naturally, or elicit any signs of interest from Mabel, if she did.

Her long week of spring vacation began on a Friday; she determined to give it whole-heartedly to her little sister, telling Mabel ten days later, on the very day before the wedding, of the new plan, and the newspaper only after the event. That would mean that she and her sister might have almost ten perfect days at the Bay, a wonderful ten days, whose memories must suffice Mabels for a long, long time.

For when Hildegarde came back to California it would be almost Christmas time, and everything would be changed. She would be used to her new name and state then, she would be obliged to entertain and be entertained, she would be ready to take her position as one of the most interesting—perhaps quite the most interesting, of the social set's young matrons.

And Mabel would hate all that. She hated purely social affairs, gossip, hot rooms, bridge, dresses. Hildegarde had had more than one opportunity, during the past weeks, to see the unmistakable signs of distaste in Mabel's eyes. Mabel did not even like Hildegarde's sudden interest in French, her perusal of fashionable monthlies.

"Mabs, you're ridiculous! You were teasing me all last winter to study French verbs with you."

"I know. But that's not what you're doing now!"

"Why isn't it? Look at the book! 'French Verbs at a Glance.' What do you call it?"

"Yes, I know. But you're studying now because you admire those horrible San Mateo women—you keep telling me that they pronounce French so exquisitely that it's a pleasure to hear them speak to their maids!"

"Well, it is, really. It makes one realize how little one knows."

"Hilda, I hate that 'one' stuff!"

"Oh, Baby darling, don't be cross at me. I feel such a fool when I'm with them, never having seen a big opera, or spoken a word in any language but my own."

"But, then, why do you go with them, Hilda? Sunday after Sunday——"

"Why, perhaps, because Mr. Penfield is such an old friend of mine, dear. You *know* you like Sidney!"

"I know I hate him!"

"Oh, come, Mabs, you said that he was the most generous person you'd ever known."

"But that doesn't necessarily mean I *like* him, does it?"

"It ought to, you contrary muggins."

"Well, it doesn't. He's—he's just *changed* you. You talk of nothing but his set, as if they mattered! You used to laugh at all of them when you were doing society! But now you take them as seriously as if their liking you was the most important thing in the world. You'll quote to me that Mrs. Porter said you were a gentlewoman, as if—as if *I* didn't know you were the loveliest person in the whole world!"

"Mabs, dearest, don't cry. I know I'm a fool. But—but you expected me to fall in love with somebody, sometime, didn't you?"

"Hilda, you *don't* love him!"

"Baby, if I did?"

"But—but, Hildegard, he doesn't want to marry a woman who writes for the newspapers!"

"Listen, Mabsie. He knows all about me and he loves me."

It was a warm April night. Hildegard was intoxicated with youth, with spring, with excitement. She would be his wife in two days' time. The marriage license was buttoned snugly into his overcoat, he would come up to the Bay tomorrow, the Penfield private car would take them to Chicago four days from to-day.

She was in a basket chair in the garden. Mabs was stretched at full length in a collapsed old *chaise longue* that was her favourite spot in times of leisure. The world was drenched in moonlight; a day of breathless heat had been succeeded by a night that was like a tropical June.

Shadows fell in an exquisite pattern of black lace from the grape arbour and the pepper trees. The bay rippled mysteriously, like molten metal under the moon. The air was sweet with the dying fragrance of cut grass and delicate bridal wreath; varnished brave buttercups lifted little petalled faces to the arch of the deep, velvet blue sky.

Mabs's cat made little rushes and retreats under a syringa bush that bent laden sprays to the grass; the Airedale lay watching her intently, his hairy face stretched out to rest upon extended forepaws.

"You say he knows everything, Hilda. You've not told him—*everything*?"

"Absolutely. And he loves me in spite of it!"

"That's a fine idea," Mabs muttered under her breath, "his forgiving you!"

"Let's be honest, darling. There *was* something to forgive."

Mabs was silent; Hilda could see her frowning in the moonlight.

"Oh, but, Hilda, you're so much more wonderful than he is! You—you're ten times too good for any man, I don't care if he's a saint!"

"But, Mabs—no, just let me speak one minute, dearest. You've known, you've guessed—what came between me and Sidney Penfield five years ago?"

"His jealousy," Mabs said resentfully, "and that he wanted to marry a rich girl!"

"He'd never seen the rich girl then, you monkey. You're almost nineteen now, Mabs—you're quite old enough to understand. You must have guessed, in all this time, that it was something very serious that Sidney couldn't forgive?"

Mabs looked at her, got up from her chair, and came across the grass to kneel at Hildegard's knee, locking her arms about her sister's waist.

"I suppose—I guessed that, Sis," she whispered.

Hildegard pushed back the dark hair, smiled into the eyes that were so near her own.

"And isn't it generous for a man to overlook that, Mabs?"

"Oh, Hildegard, no—*no!* Not when the woman's *you!*"

"You goose, I think it is!"

"Hildegard, you mean that you're going to marry him!"

"Some day, perhaps."

"And we aren't to have our trip to New York?"

Hildegard had always imagined that at this point she could say to Mabs: "Dearest, not just when we planned. But you and I are going to do such marvellous things that we can well afford to let that wait a few years!"

But, somehow, the words did not seem appropriate now, and she could only keep her hand on Mabel's forehead, and stare into the dark, anxious eyes so close to her own.

"We're so happy, Hilda, and we have everything! Why did he have to come along and spoil it all, with his horrible money and gloves and big car and polo ponies and all the rest of it! We had this garden, and the bay, and Lars next door, and everyone coming up for week-ends; everyone who ever did anything worth while—and all in love with you! And now he—he thinks he can buy——"

Her voice sank, muttering. She stopped on a sulky note.

"Now he thinks?—I didn't get that."

Silence.

"Come on, now, what was that last word, Mabs?"

"Nothing, Hilda."

"You said——" Hildegard's voice sank to a lowered note. "That isn't what my little sister *really* thinks Sidney Penfield is doing?" she asked. "Look at me, Mabs."

Mabs raised unwilling eyes, and Hildegard laughed and kissed her. She would not quarrel with Mabs to-night. These last hours together were too precious, too exquisitely beautiful to be sacrificed for any cause whatsoever.

The weather, on this vacation week, had been perfection. The bay had never seemed so blue, the garden so packed with bloom. There was a scent of wet earth, of acacia blossoms, of new growth in the air; the whole world trembled on wings. Birds looped Mabel's rose bushes, and when Lars and Hildegard and Mabs wandered off together for walks in the woods, there were blue flashes from the wings of jays, and now and then, from the more open spaces, where creamy and lavender iris stood in shy companies, the heart-reaching, quick bubbling note of the mounting lark.

Lars, after three days in the city, had come up on Thursday, with no suitcase, but with some seventy grimy, heavy books from the second-hand stores. Some for Hilda, some for Mabel, many for the bookcases that lined his cabin next door.

He must walk in the village and buy a shirt, and pajamas, and another toothbrush.

"We have one of your toothbrushes, Lars, at our house," Mabel had said, on the walk.

"And we had those old knickerbockers—you've got those? Oh, you're all right, then!" Hilda had added.

"Lars, deep cherry pie. I made pie crust again."

"But I brought you some pastries. You said last week——"

"That's all right. We can have those to-morrow. Can't we, Hilda?"

"Surely." But Hildegard, walking between them on the sweet rambling road that was sometimes in the wood, and sometimes on the shore, had wondered with a sudden pang if these two dearest ones would feel much in the mood for pastries at this time to-morrow. "Sidney will surely

be here at this time to-morrow, and they'll know all about it," she thought. "And I may be married at this time day after to-morrow!"

Her new thin *crêpe* gown—but no, she wouldn't be married in black. The old silk, then, and the velvet hat. And from the lower drawer of her bureau she would take the thin peach-coloured silky things at which Mabs had looked with such suspicion, with such hostility, when they had come home in a "White House" box last week.

Del Monte for forty-eight hours, and then the train, and then New York. In New York she could order boxes and boxes of beautiful things. Meanwhile, she must think out every occasion and its needs, and be as ready as she might.

To-night was Saturday. Sidney would arrive on Sunday, and early on Monday morning, or perhaps even Sunday night, they would all go down to the city in his car; Lars must come, too, to take care of Mabs after Hildegard went away. He would take her to the city apartment, and turn her over to the charming O'Connor girls, whose apartment was next to the Sessionses', and who loved Mabs.

They'd all have a little supper together, probably; cream from the dairy, still in its fat little bottle, rye bread, cheese, fat little imported sausages, salad in the big yellow bowl.

Or perhaps Lars would take them all to Moretti's or Coppa's, and the crowd would be there, and the talk would be all of Hilda—Hilda who had queened it at these homely feasts for so many years. They'd miss her——

And she would miss them! Yes, even as Mrs. Sidney Penfield, buying boxes and boxes of pretty things in New York, sailing on a big steamer for Paris, she would have times of missing the hot, crowded City Room with its smells of soap and ink and rubber, its wild racket and rush, its failures only a little less thrilling than its successes. She would miss the men who stood behind her typewriter and exchanged comment and congratulation, miss the streets, the delicacy stores, the beauty parlours, the fruit stands, through which she had moved so busily, so confidently upon her way.

She would miss Moretti's, the consciousness that whether she spoke or was silent, was glad or sorry, she was always the ringleader, that everyone else who came in took his seat with reference to Hilda Sessions's neighbourhood.

And more than all, how she would miss the Bay! Would "Broadhall" ever seem to her as sweet as this five-room shack over which the oak and pepper branches leaned so lovingly, as this garden whose irregular paths, crammed with homely flowers, led straight to the sea? The fireplace with Hildegard's chair on the left, and the wide hassock Mabs loved close beside it, and Lars's customary big, shabby leather seat opposite; the north porch outside the kitchen, where they could breakfast in cool shadow on the hottest mornings, watching the summer mists rise from the satin stretch of dreaming Bay, the sandy rambling lanes between pines, the dip of oars in blue waters.

Clicking her disreputable typewriter here, eyes sometimes on the pages, more often lost in dreamy study of oak branches or slowly waving tassels of acacia, she had found her way back to peace.

Months of it, years of it, had smoothed away the old hard scars, and filled her heart to the brim. Mabs to love, her work to do, her good neighbour with his brotherly loyalty, his old books, his tireless interest, to depend upon, and all the world friendly to the vital, eager, hard-working woman of twenty-five who had travelled a hard, hard road in such loneliness and discouragement only a few years ago.

It was too bad to end it. It was too bad that some other woman, starved in heart and brain, couldn't come to the Bay now, and use this heavenly little place as a stepping stone to higher things, as Hildegard had.

The last hours, filled with Mabs's little affectionate services, filled with moonshine and sunrise, fragrance and peace, were almost too much to bear. When Sunday afternoon came, and she knew that at any moment now Sidney's big car might come purring to a stop at their shabby little gate, Hildegard found herself almost suffocated with a heaviness, a pressing pain at her heart. Everything would be all right

once Mabs understood, but, meanwhile, it was terrible to anticipate the moment of telling her.

"Dearest, we're going to be married to-morrow! Will you kiss your new brother and wish us all sorts of nice things?"

Would Mabs begin to cry? And if she did, would she cry while they were driving all the long way down to the city, and cry through the ceremony, and part from Hilda, still weeping?

Hildegarde felt that she simply couldn't bear that.

On the other hand, if darling little old Mabs were brave—if she pulled herself together, and kept the tears back, and helped and smiled and encouraged, it would be even worse!

How did other girls who loved their sisters manage it? They must be getting married all the time.

"I wish to-morrow were over!" Hildegarde said in her heart a hundred times, as the slow hours dragged on. And she smiled ruefully. To-morrow, in her thoughts, should have been nothing but her wedding day! It wasn't fair to Sidney, and to all the bright future, to think of anything but happiness to-morrow.

A reprieve arrived at about three o'clock, a note saying that he would join them for breakfast on Monday.

And we must be here in town, sweetheart, at about one o'clock. But we'll be here an hour earlier than that. I've taken a suite for you and Mabel at the Fairmont, where you can rest and brush up and have some luncheon sent upstairs, if you like. You and I'll be on our way south at two; Hilda, I won't try to say anything now, but I'm the happiest man in the world!

So that meant another evening of moonlight in the garden, with Lars stretched out on the grass, silent, dreaming, pallid light on his fair, tumbled head, and with Mabs in the *chaise longue*, sometimes reciting poetry, sometimes still.

"The last time—the last time—the last time——" Hildegarde's thoughts said, with a sort of sickness upon them. "Why do even the happy things of life have to have so much sadness mixed into them!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

SHE was up at six o'clock in the dreamy April morning, and saw the trailing scarfs of mist rise slowly from the smooth, shining bay. The garden was motionless, except that here and there a bird hopped with a tentative chirp, and Mabs's kitten was hunting, her fat furry little body leaving silver trails of broken dewdrops on the high grass.

A rowboat slid by in the still fog-wrapped water; Lars Carlsen, pulling with strong splendid strokes, the striped sleeves of his wrapper slipping up and down on his big arms. He had gone down the bay for an early swim; sometimes he shouted for the girls when he went by, but this morning he had been unusually early.

The day would be warm, but it was deliciously cool and wet and fresh now. Hildegard, in a lavender swiss gown that made her eyes look purple rather than blue, and with a white hat pushed down on her rich, thick tawny hair, wandered down to the shore that was slowly being captured by the tide, wandered back through the seething mists and penetrating sun rays that were battling about the pepper trees, and saw Sidney Penfield getting out of his car at the gate.

She crossed the space between them, she was in his arms.

"Sidney, you darling! But it isn't seven yet—or it's just seven!"

"But I didn't sleep at all last night, Mrs. Penfield-to-be. Kiss me. *Kiss me, Hilda.*"

"You should have come up last night!"

"I know. I was sorry. But who do you think's come to the city for the great event? Aunt Alice! The first time in years, I imagine. She sent forth a sort of royal mandate yesterday that we were all to dine with her at the Palace, and

that I was to spend the evening with her. That's why I wasn't here."

Hildegarde laughed joyfully. There was something funny—far funnier than any Penfield suspected—in this deference to the wishes of Aunt Alice.

Sidney sat on the porch, and she came and went between it and the kitchen. Mabs came down, and was told, and appeared only dazed. Lars came over, still wet of head, but magnificent in an open-collared white shirt, and was told, and seemed dazed, too. A surprise! They were all going into town at nine, and Hilda and Sidney were going to be married at Saint John's—

"No, not Saint John's," Sidney interrupted, his arm still about the younger girl, who had just had his first brotherly kiss. "Aunt Alice insists that it shall be in her apartment. Decorators, caterers, and so forth, are already in there, I suppose."

"Oh, Sid, not in church?"

"Now, what does church mean to you? You never go!" Sidney teased.

"Well, I know." Still, one's wedding was one's wedding. And she had liked the idea of the dim, big place, with the spring sunshine slanting in, and just a dozen persons gathered before the big altar. A stuffy old woman's rooms at the Palace didn't seem the same.

But never mind. The diversion had served to get them over the bad moment. Mabs knew, now, and if she was a little pale and quiet, she was in no other way disturbed.

"We'll have breakfast just as soon as it's ready, then," Mabs said, kissing her sister. It was a quick kiss, a sad kiss, it was unaccompanied by any glance; Mabs averted her eyes, and busied herself with the breakfast affairs.

"I'll make an omelette. This man must be starving," Hildegarde said. She was heartsick, almost frightened, when she found herself alone in the little kitchen with Mabs, loosening the fluffy mass of the eggs from the hot buttered pan, touching the hot platter with investigating finger-tips, conscious only that her lark—her little busy singing contented

sister—was stricken as if by death. “Mabs, were you surprised?”

“Oh—oh, not really, Hilda. I knew—I’ve known for a long time that you were—excited about it.”

“You’ve seen how happy I was, you smart little thing!” One fair look into the serious brown eyes.

“No, I don’t think you’ve been happy. I said excited.”

“Yes, but you think I’m happy *now*, you bad baby?”

“D-d-don’t get me s-s-started, Hilda——”

It was said in a low, quick tone. Mabs knelt at the oven, took out the pan of hot rolls, limped away to the porch. Hildegarde, carrying the platter of omelette, followed her.

“We couldn’t have a lovelier day for it, Hildegarde.”

“No, could we? Butter, Lars?”

“Thanks.”

“But I’m sorry you’re not going to be married at Saint John’s, Hildegarde,” Mabs said with a sort of delicate, pained deliberation, with a sort of fluttered courage. “Our mother never gave us any religion,” she added, looking Sidney fairly in the face. “But Hilda and I live near Saint John’s, in the city, and for years, now, we’ve liked to slip in there, sometimes to services, and sometimes only to pray.”

“I know,” Sidney apologized quickly, “it was the first thing Hildegarde said, that she would like to be married there, and—inasmuch as my father gave them the ground for the church—you may imagine that it was easy enough to arrange,” he added sympathetically. “But we—we don’t go against Aunt Alice, in *my* family!” he added, laughing.

“She is so rich?” Lars asked simply, harshly, looking up.

Hildegarde’s heart began to hammer nervously. If they were going to be disagreeable on her wedding day——!

Sidney gave the other man a confident, appraising glance.

“Only two or three million or so,” he said airily. “You’ll admit that a favourite nephew has some reason for—considering her.”

“It’s not that!” Hildegarde protested quickly, with a little nervous laugh.

“What is it, then?” Lars asked sharply.

Hildegarde looked at Sidney expectantly, even while she felt a certain shock and surprise in her heart. What was it, then? Why, it was—it was that Aunt Alice was old—no, not quite that. But it was that she was the—the head of the Family.

Sidney was looking steadily at Lars, with half-lowered lids and a set jaw.

"You'll excuse me, Carlsen," he said, after a brief silence, terrible to Hildegarde, "if I don't consider that you have any right to ask me that question, or any other question!"

"For that matter," Mabs said unexpectedly, with an air of smoothing down the situation, "I suppose you *could* be married in Saint John's, Hildegarde, if you wanted to, even now. You could simply tell Sidney's Aunt Alice that you preferred it, I suppose?"

Hildegarde's hostile eyes, burning like sapphires above the suddenly augmented rose-colour of her cheeks, did not waver from Lars's.

"Certainly I could!" she said proudly.

"Not now, very well, Hildegarde," Sidney pleaded. "You see, Aunt Alice has arranged everything—she had me telephone Doctor Findley last night——"

"Ha!" Lars ejaculated abruptly. Mabel sank back in her chair with a long "Ah-h-h!" her fingers gripping the edge of the table, her eyes fixed fearfully, expectantly on Hilda.

"Once and for all, this isn't your business!" Sidney said levelly to the other man.

"It's ridiculous to make such a fuss about it," Hildegarde said lightly. But she was trembling. "I'd do a great deal to please your aunt, Sid," she added quietly, "but I think in this matter she should either have stayed away, as she first said she would, or have consulted me. Don't you?"

"But of course I do, dear! Only—you know Aunt Alice?"

"Well, of course. But I think that, under the circumstances, we had better send her a wire from Point Reyes, before we go down, and say that we will be married at one o'clock in Saint John's, as we planned."

She had gotten to her feet; superb, beautiful, her blue eyes not moving from his, she stood before him.

Sidney, standing opposite her, bowed briefly, profoundly.

"Certainly. I shall have to wire my mother and Doctor Findley, too. But—certainly!" He turned smilingly, almost triumphantly to Lars. "Having done what you could to upset our plans, may I suggest that it is after eight o'clock now," he began politely, almost jocosely, with a look that included Mabel. "We must be on our way in twenty minutes."

Lars was sitting at the table, his untouched coffee beside him, his roll unbroken. Hildegard, looking at him, saw that he was very pale.

"Penfield," he began deliberately, in a voice that turned Hildegard's heart to water, "I have not done what I could to upset your plans. It is extremely possible that if I did what I could to upset your plans, they might *be* upset."

He stood up, and his chair banged to the porch behind him.

They were all silent now, looking at each other, panting a little, like four suddenly encountered animals.

"Lars——" Hildegard whispered, in the pause.

"She's going to marry you to-day," Lars said, in a measured tone, his tall head slightly stooped forward, so that his blue viking eyes were on a level with Sidney's eyes. "She's going to marry you because she's made a hero of you for five years—the rich man who would marry a little girl who was a nobody!

"But what she doesn't know," Lars went on, after a pause in which the sheer force of his voice, ringing in the air, seemed to hold them all speechless and motionless, "what she doesn't know is that *she* is the one who will give, now, not you! Whatever you were five years ago, ten years ago, doesn't matter. She's made herself one of the wonderful women of the world—she's beautiful, she's brilliant, she's good, she's loved by every man who ever sees her—and she's done it herself——"

"I grant you that," Sidney said sulkily, sharply, in the silence.

"You grant me that! I thank you." Lars went on with a sort of forced deliberation. But he was trembling, too. "You went away from her once—you broke her heart, you left her alone, with nothing, with nobody to help her, and you married another woman—a rich and beautiful woman. For years she had to struggle back to happiness, back to friendship and work—with no help from you.

"But now, when your wife has failed you, when you've learned she couldn't give you a home, couldn't give you a child, you come back to Hildegarde. You find her—Ah, Hildegarde!" Lars broke off, his big voice shaking, tears brimming his eyes, although he was smiling, "he finds you what you are. Mabel's whole world, the dearest—the dearest—of us all. Your work succeeding, your future full of joy——"

Hildegarde sat down at the table, and stretched her white linked hands before her, and laid her bright head on them.

"You buy her back," Lars went on, again addressing the other man, and speaking all the more harshly for the moment of emotion. "You buy her back with your wealth, your position. You make her feel that, even as your second choice, she is lucky! You fill her with your false standard of the nonsense you believe, of"—he searched for a word—"of—social values. She will be a society leader. Of *what*? Of jaded, painted, divorced, gossiping women who will always despise her. She will court them, imitate them, study French to please them, buy clothes and jewels that they must envy, bear children, not because they are her children, but because they will be Penfields, they will carry on the line!

"And when she goes down to the gates of death for her first child, and when that beautiful body of hers is racked and torn to give it life, your mother will say that the house has a son at last, and your father will give her—what did you tell me he would always give the mother of a child, Hilda?—an emerald ring.

"And always—always, the women will get together, and remind each other that there was something strange about that old engagement, before Sidney Penfield left college. Do

you remember? There was something. And they will congratulate themselves that she could outlive that, and that they are big enough, secure enough, to be her friends, and she will go on charity boards, and write checks, to help them to forget!

"And always—always—Mabs and I will remember her here, won't we, Mabs?—our Hildegard, laughing, writing, cooking, talking—so much the biggest of us all—so much the purest—the best! At whose feet we kneel—as I kneel now!"

He knelt down beside her, he took her nearest hand, and pressed it to his wet cheek, and she, leaning forward in her chair, put her arm about his neck as a crying little sister might have done, and buried her face in his big shoulder.

"Hildegard," Sidney said in a choked voice, after a moment, "do we have to listen to this sort of thing?"

She raised her wet dishevelled face from Lars's shoulder, and it was a radiant face, despite the eyelashes that were sopped together with tears, and the trembling mouth, and the tumbled soft aureole of bright hair.

"Sidney," she said, thickly, half laughing, half crying, mopping her eyes with Lars's big handkerchief. "I'm sorry—I'm sorry. But—don't you see? He's *right*."

"Oh, he's right!" Hildegard repeated, on an exultant note that was almost a song. She walked across the little porch, drying her eyes, breathed a great breath of the sweet air that came across the bay, and turned back to them. "I have outgrown it, but I'd been living in the dream so many years I didn't see it!" she said. "Oh, Sidney—if I'd found it out too late! Mabs, you said something that was absolutely true, just this morning, when you said that I was excited but that I wasn't happy!" She went to Sidney, standing like a man of rock, staring at her, his lip bitten, his eyes narrowed. "Sidney, you'll forgive me?" she pleaded, the childish eagerness that was Hilda, and that Lars and Mabel had not seen for long weeks, breaking through her words. "You must—as I did you. But—but it's true, you know. I don't—I *can't* take it all seriously! I've been a society

reporter too long. That's—that's been the trouble—I've been trying to make myself believe it all, the family talk, the social laws, the discussion of who really belonged to our set and who didn't—and all the time it's only been because that old dream was on me, the dream that Sidney Penfield had jilted me, and that some day I'd win him back! Why, Mabs, Mabs," Hildegard said, in a breaking voice, her arms about the little sister who had run to that familiar shelter, "don't, my sweetest. Don't cry, Mouse. Are you really so glad that we are going to be poor instead of rich, and work hard instead of play, and have those pastries of Lars's for lunch, instead of my wedding breakfast at the Palace?"

She looked at Sidney apologetically, and there was all the wisdom of the hard, endless years in her smiling eyes.

"We began in a Dump in San Bruno," she explained. "I used to drag her to the butcher's when I was only a baby myself; she had her first pair of silk stockings only a few years ago, and she never had a governess or a French lesson or a pedigree in her life! We're not much, but we—we're just that crazy!—we do like our way best.

"And now, Mabsie, walk with Lars down to the end of the garden and back, and give me a chance to apologize to Sid, and say that I'm sorry. Then he'll go back—to his Aunt Alice. I'm laughing, Sid, but I'm crying, too." She came close to him, radiant, tearful, superb in her confident beauty, put warm fingers on his hand, raised her wonderful eyes. There was no faltering, no doubt now. "Sid," she asked, "will you tell me that you forgive me?"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE sound of the great engine died away softly into the summery April morning. An infinite peace enveloped the Bay, and the lines of wooded shore that ran down into the blue water.

Lars Carlsen had disappeared. Mabel was fussing with Spanish sauce in the kitchen, stopping now and then to wipe her eyes. Happy was on the doorstep, watching his mistress intently.

Hildegarde lay in the *chaise longue*, dreaming. They were long dreams, spanning as they did the twenty years that she could remember.

They began with the cold, the dirt, the squalor and noise, the smells of ashes and whisky near the Dump. They went on to Grammar School—in dirty bundled clothes and smeared sweaters. Running for bread, dragged from behind the door screaming, for a whipping. Miss Doyle, sympathetic and encouraging to a prize scholar. Ambition, the beginnings of beauty, boys friendly to one on lazy autumn afternoons, walking home.

Then graduation, and a visit to Belvedere—and Norman.

Where was Norman Montgomery now? Drifting about the world with some wandering stock company. Hildegarde had neither seen him nor heard his name for years.

But the thought of him carried her memories to that paralyzing day at the Teachers' Institute, when she had stood at the blackboard, and had—known. And then flight, and Carlsen's Bazaar, with the saloon next door, and the old horse whinnying in the back yard, and the locomotives and dolls—dolls with cheap, fuzzy hair visibly glued to their badly baked faces.

A certain foggy, damp Christmas Eve, and the hospital;

fiery pain, long, dull convalescence, and then Carlsen's Bazaar again, and Pidgy, and the wonderland of the theatre, and the workroom, and meeting all sorts of wild-headed boys and girls at Moretti's.

Her first story for the *Sun*, and Sidney suddenly in her life again. San Mateo visits, the intoxication of loving and believing herself loved. Norman's reappearance, with all the horror and danger it brought, and her confession, and its resulting separation from the man she loved so blindly, and her wild, breathless prayer through the lonely months that he would come back to her, that their two years of trial would be only a year—less than a year!

And then the frightful day of trouble on the *Sun*, and the news that he had not been faithful to her, after all. That a beautiful, rich, protected girl was looking into his eyes, raising her young mouth for his kisses, that all their circle were rejoicing that they were to be married.

Blackness. Blackness. And out of it, Mabs. Simple, clever, gay little Mabs, with her plans and theories and activities, her raptures over puppies and babies and kittens, her eager assimilation of everything that was wonderful in life.

Mabs, and the beginning of better times. The beginning of success, of happiness, of hope. The first little cabin on Russian Hill, and the first friends, the first trip to the Bay.

It was strange to sit here in her own garden, remembering it all, dreaming about it, getting its proportion and its significance. Hildegarde felt an odd, hazy satisfaction quietly rising in her veins, as the quiet moments followed one another, and the last of the fog drifted away, and the sun strengthened and brightened over all the blue spring world.

After a while, Mabs came timidly down to her and stood hesitant. And Hildegarde turned to smile at her and stretched out a hand.

Instantly the younger girl was on her knees, fearful, hopeful, eager.

"Hildegarde, my dearest! Are you all right?"

"Quite all right, Mouse. Why not?"

"You've not been crying?"

"Crying? No!"

"You don't feel too badly?"

"No. Just a little shaken and bewildered—but, on the whole, happy and thankful, Mabs."

"Oh, Hilda, your heart's not broken?"

"Not this time."

"And shall you—see him again?"

"Sidney? Never. It's just—*over*, that. It was something like a test—something I wanted to be sure that I *could* do. And now that I know I could do it, why, I don't want to."

"But—but you've been sitting here, perfectly quiet, for almost two hours, Hilda."

"Just thinking, Mabs. Thinking out all the years——"

"Dearest, it won't make you ill?"

"Oh, nonsense, of course not. It was just—a shock. And, Mabs, if you knew the peace—the restfulness of having it over!"

Mabs remained tranced, kneeling beside her, her hands linked in Hildegarde's, her eager, anxious eyes concentrated upon the beautiful face.

"Hilda, what shall you do now?"

"Now? Why—how about lunch? And then we'll go into town, and I'll report at the office, and if I'm not wanted there, we'll take some lettuce and fruit up to the flat—or dine down-town somewhere."

"Oh, Hilda," Mabel stammered, collapsing into sudden tears, "I can't believe that it's all going on as it has been, so happy, and so free! I feel as if I were in heaven!"

"Well, why cry about it?"

"And are we to go East in September?"

"It would seem so."

"Hildegarde, I think I shall die of joy!"

"You? I'm the one that ought to feel——" Hildegarde began, and stopped short. "And I do feel grateful," she added, in a lower tone. "I do feel grateful! I feel as if I had been through a sickness."

"But you know you spoke of going into town, Hilda," Mabs said somewhat hesitatingly, after a long silence. "Did you mean with Lars in his car? Because I think he is going away. He spoke as if he were! He spoke as if he might have offended you, angered you, and as if he were afraid he wouldn't be welcome here—wouldn't be forgiven."

Hildegarde, holding her sister off at arm's length, smiled at her slowly. And in her thin lavender dress and white hat, with her eyes shining, and her perfect body stretched in the *chaise longue*, with her gold hair loosened in waves and rings against the old canvas pillow she had jerked under her head, her mouth just curved a little in that look of sureness, of amused confidence, that sometimes almost awed Mabs, it was as if the long years stood still for a moment, to give the younger sister a moment's glimpse of the whole woman, completed, magnificent, even in this strange hour. For, despite the fact that she lay here, exhausted and bewildered, like one beaten, in the healing warmth and silence and perfume of the garden, Hildegarde's was a look of triumph. There was a hint of deep, significant laughter behind the serious eyes.

"Lars said all that?"

"Oh, he felt frightfully. He—honestly, Hilda, I was afraid he might kill himself! He said he had been your friend for ten years, and he thought, this morning, that he had thrown it all away. And he said that he wouldn't come back until you sent for him."

"And shall we send for him, Mouse?"

"Oh, Hilda, if you *would*!"

Hildegarde smiled at her, cryptically, maternally, holding the younger girl beside her with a little pressure of linked fingers.

"Mabs darling," she said whimsically, "I'm twenty-five. I've made every mistake a human woman can make, I've failed at more things than most women know there are, even to try! I've cried, I've agonized, I've been humiliated, I've despaired. I've mispronounced French words and forgotten to put the baking powder into gingerbread, I've gotten

tired shopping, and bought the wrong dress, and I've lost a purse with twenty-two dollars in it. The stories I've thought the best I've ever written, the editor has turned down, and the rubbish I've hammered off while the presses were waiting has been copied in exchanges everywhere. I didn't know until this morning that I didn't want to marry Sidney Penfield. I don't know now where my father or mother are, or whether I really can write, or whether our trip East this fall will be a success or a failure——"

She laid her exquisite face against her sister's, and laughed through her words.

"But out of it all, Mouse dearest, I've emerged with just—one—*positive*—unshakable—conviction!" she concluded.

"Oh, Hilda, and what is it?"

"You won't give me away?"

"Hilda!"

"And you'll love me anyway?"

"Ah, dearest, more than any of them ever will!"

"Well, then, Mabs, this is what I've discovered." Hildgarde put her lips close to her little sister's ear, but her blue eyes were fixed on the peppers and roses that half hid the tottering fence on the north side, on Lars Carlsen's side, of the garden, and on the stretch of dreaming water that was beyond, asleep in the blue spring morning.

"That I don't have to send Lars Carlsen a message to say that I want him to come to lunch!" she said.

THE END





